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MAD GUNMEN OF THE BIG MISSOU'

by ROBERT L. TRIMNELL

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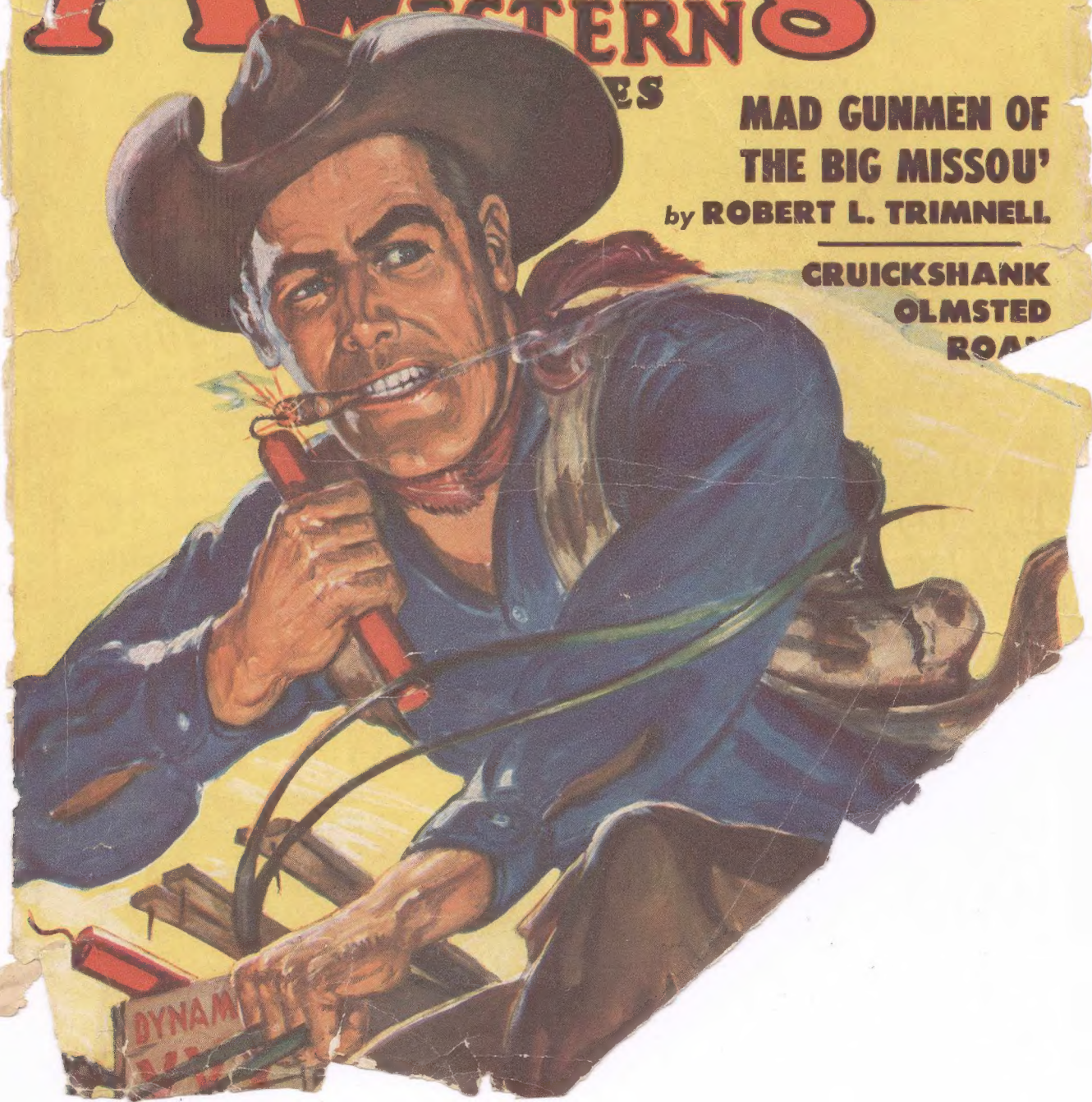

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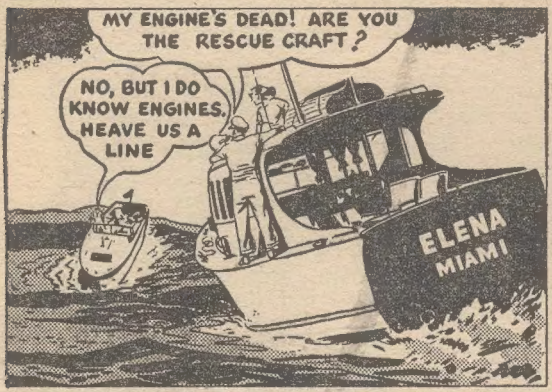

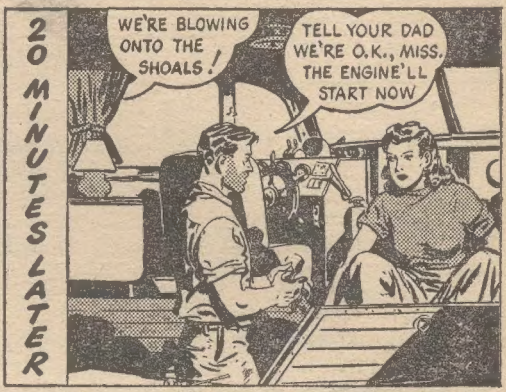

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Vol. 22, No. 1

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POPULAR FILMS

Good Movie-Going For Fiction Fans

Ted Palmer Picks:

For A Western—"Roughshod" with Robert Sterling, Gloria Grahame and Claude Jarman, Jr. (RKO).

As if they didn't have trouble enough, a quartet of women from the dance hall at Aspen, Nevada, join up with Clay and Steve Phillips (Robert Sterling and Claude Jarman, Jr.) who are headed for California with a herd of blooded horses. To make matters worse, an ex-convict is gunning for Clay. The brothers manage to get rid of all the women except Mary (Gloria Grahame) who has taken a shine to Clay—but Clay isn't taking. That is, until after a rip-roaring gunfight during which the outlaw bites the dust. *A "western" proving that men are still men.*

• • •

For Suspense—"House of Strangers" with Edward G. Robinson, Susan Hayward and Richard Conte (20th Century-Fox).

The strangers in this house are the four Monetti brothers. The story is of Max Monetti's (Richard Conte) personal vendetta against the others for allowing him to go to prison while trying to save their father (Edward G. Robinson) from jail. It's the love of a woman (Susan Hayward) and the final realization of how futile his motives are that saves Max. In between, *this film develops plenty of chair-gripping tension.*

• • •

For Romantic Adventure—"The Great Sinners" with Gregory Peck, Ava Gardner, Melvyn Douglas, Walter Huston and Ethel Barrymore (MGM).

Peck's a writer, Ava's his girl, Huston's her father, Melvyn's the churl. Mix them all up in a European gambling casino around 1860 and you have a story. Pauline Ostrovsky and her father (Ava Gardner and Walter Huston) have gambling in their blood—not so writer Peck. But when the Ostrovsky chips go down—and down, Peck risks his own money to prevent Pauline from marrying the cad, Armand De Glasse (Melvyn Douglas), for his money. Peck loses at the wheel—and loses spiritually. He finally regains mastery of both—and the girl. *A well-played tale.*

• • •

For Comedy—"Sorrowful Jones" with Bob Hope and Lucille Ball (Paramount).

Damon Runyon's wonderful story of bookmakers, mobsters and "little Miss Marker" is retold here with Bob Hope in the title role. Filled with typical Hope clowning, Runyonesque characters like "Regret," "Big Steve," "Once Over Sam" and the beauteous Lucille Ball, this picture makes the best of a good story. Briefly, Sorrowful, as a miserly bookmaker, accepts a five year old girl as a marker for a bet on a fixed horse race. When the child's father is liquidated by the mob for trying to "unfix" the race, Hope takes it upon himself to protect her from the gang. In the end, the thugs are outwitted and everyone lives happily ever after. *This is an hilarious Hope vehicle for all.*

• • •

For Music—"Look for the Silver Lining" with June Haver, Ray Bolger and Gordon MacRae (Warner Brothers) Technicolor.

Perhaps all won't remember Marilyn Miller—one of the greatest musical comedy stars ever—but everybody will recognize the many tuneful and nostalgic melodies that stud this screen portrayal of her life. With June Haver as the star; Ray Bolger as Jack Donahue, one of the inspirations in her life, and Gordon MacRae playing Frank Carter, her first husband, this picture tells Marilyn's story of devotion to the stage. From her very first appearance as a child with the "Four Columbians" to her final performance in "Sally", she and all about her were a part of the theatre. Musical memories include "Who", "Sunny", "A Kiss in the Dark", "Time on My Hands", and, of course, the title piece. *A skillful blend of fact and music, solidly entertaining.*

• • •

For Sports—"The Great Dan Patch" with Dennis O'Keefe, Gail Russell and Ruth Warrick (United Artists).

The greatest pacing horse of them all was Dan Patch, and this is his story—more or less. He gets born, trained, raced on the Grand Circuit and made a champion. There's also some kind of plot involving people, but *you'll be most interested in the harness racing on which this film is based.*

Outtrail Caravan

By The LINE-RIDER

YOU MAY cringe and backtrack to get away from a black cat whenever you see one—most people do—but there was a time in the Old West when black cats were worth a hundred dollars apiece, and a man who didn't own one might be in danger of losing his livelihood.

It was in the days before DDT and rat poison and the only real way to keep rats out of your house or your store was by keeping a hungry cat on the premises. Some men even made a business of selling cats, but none did it on a larger scale than a two-bit gambler and con man named Carter Ince.

Our friend John T. Lynch writes us an interesting anecdote about Ince, which contains an authentic picture of conditions in San Francisco during the gold rush.

Take it away, John T.:

During the entire year of 1849 poor Carter Ince saw many men come in and strike it rich in the gold diggings to the east and north of San Francisco, while he struck nothing but hard work and bad luck. His many claims had proved worthless, and he always got to the scene of the most recent rich findings just too late.

Disgusted and discouraged, he decided to turn to crime. If he couldn't make his fortune in an honest way, he told himself, he would make it some other way.

But in this, too, he was doomed to disappointment. In San Francisco, he found, professional thieves, robbers and murderers were so numerous that they were preying on each other.

Ince soon realized that he—a simple youth from Ohio—was not in the same league as the notorious "Sydney Ducks," the cruel cutthroats from Shanghai's water front, and the assorted outlaws, highwaymen and road agents who had been drawn by the gold rush from all parts of the world to this bustling, brawling city that was the hub of all activities.

Carter Ince, the would-be bad man, was only in the city a few hours when he was slugged and robbed of the few dollars he owned.

Much as his pride hurt him, Ince was forced to take the first job he could find if he was to keep on eating. Forlornly, he went to work in Ab Walters' grocery.

"I'm right glad to get a helper," Ab said. "Most young men hit for th' diggin's. Others take to crime. None of 'em want decent jobs."

"I'm different," Carter Ince lied. "I don't care about gold. An' I always believed that honesty is the best policy."

"That's th' way I like to hear a man talk," grinned Ab. Then he frowned. "You can work for me as long as you want—if th' rats don't ruin me."

"Rats?" queried Ince. Then he

(Continued on page 127)

MAD GUNMAN of the BIG MISSOU'

"Turn 'im upside down. I cut his legs."

Take a boot-tough mule-skinner like Joe Ramsey, whose stubborn streak is pure granite, and a big-talking promoter like Henry O'Hara, whose schemes are wilder than buckshot. . . . Team 'em up and pour 'em on that deadly freight pirate crew—and, brother, you've got a man-sized mess of hell, seared red-hot, with blood-and-bullet sauce to come!

Smashing Missouri River Novel

By
ROBERT L. TRIMNELL

CHAPTER ONE

Missouri Mule-Skinner!

IT WAS a hot day on the Missouri, hot enough that the two men pushing the raft sweeps were stripped to the waist. The air was heavy and unmoving. Sweat streamed down their backs and marsh gnats bit their bare bronzed skin.

The shriek of a steamboat whistle tore the silence wide open. The two men stopped walking their sweeps, glanced at each other.

"The *Annie O'Hara,*" Joe Ramsey said. "Can't miss that gunshot coyote sound." He was a tall, rawboned fellow with shaggy brown hair, rusty from the bleaching sun of the plains. He wore deerskin pants and moccasins, worn and marked

with sweat and campfire soot. As he relaxed, leaning on the ten-foot handle of the sweep, his corded muscles eased back into flat sheets.

Up on the bow of the raft a mule brayed. Ramsey climbed forward over the bags of wheat that covered the raft, ducked around the heavy Concord wagon that stood in their midst. Four mules were tethered on the bow. Ramsey walked up to a long-legged black mule with a white face, put his hand on the animal's mouth, rubbed it gently.

"Don't let that kind of noise grieve you, Jacob," he said. The mule rolled his eyes, raised his nose to bray again. Joe rubbed it gently. "That ol' steamboat whistle scared me a bit too, Jacob," he said. His voice was low. The mule rolled his eyes once more, his flanks quivered. Then he was quiet, nuzzling the raw-boned hand that stroked his underlip.

Ramsey turned away from the black mule, touched each of the other animals to pacify them, and climbed over the wheat sacks again toward the other man.

"Remember how they used to near jump out of their hides when they heard a steamboat whistle, Hoss Thief?"

His companion leaned on the sweep. A smaller man, lean, with the pitch-black hair, beak nose, and high cheekbones of the Sioux Indian.

"Umm. You got 'em nice and quiet these days," the Indian said. He pulled a stumpy pipe from his pants pocket, stuck it in his mouth. He might have said that Joe Ramsey had a way of calming critters down. He knew. Joe had convinced him of the wrongness of stealing other people's horses. Now that he worked for Joe, the name Hoss Thief was only a remembrance of things past.

"There she comes," Ramsey said.

They both looked upriver. The sleek whiteness of the packet *Annie O'Hara* shot around the bend. Steam mushroomed out of the whistle valve on her black port stack. It took several seconds for the scream of the whistle to reach them.

Joe Ramsey said, "Sometimes I feel like a turtle watchin' a white mare gallop by when Henry O'Hara tears that boat past us." He dug cigarette papers and a tobacco bag out of his pants pocket and began building a quirly.

"The Sioux got a name for O'Hara," Hoss Thief said. "They call him 'Gray Bear-Who-Never-Walks'."

Joe nodded. "Never walks is right. He always runs."

THE packet swept closer. The whistle blasted again. They could see a man leaning out of the pilot house, waving a white cap at them. They waved back.

"Must be O'Hara," Joe said. "The rate he's goin' he'll be in Fort Pierre before we make the next bend." He twisted his cigarette closed. His hands stopped. Something was happening aboard the packet. Voices bellowed across the deck; men began running like deer. The pilot house erupted three men and they all bolted for the bow. The engine room gangway spilled out several more. They dashed madly forward.

"Funny," Hoss Thief mumbled. "Like somebody let a bunch of rattlesnakes loose."

Then the pilot house and the Texas deck of the *Annie O'Hara* rose a hundred feet in the air; the twin stacks went spinning toward the clouds like two giant black cigars riding a column of smoke. A roar, a blast of flame leaped at the raft, a tornado wind that shrieked and threw Joe Ramsey flat on the sacks of wheat. Hoss Thief yelled, disappeared into the river. An unearthly scream went up from the mules, and burning wood showered the raft.

Joe jerked to his feet, shot a look at the packet. The entire midships of the *Annie O'Hara* turned into inky smoke, flame, bits of wood and metal. It was a single

crashing explosion; when it was over the packet was blown in half and both halves were sinking rapidly.

Joe spun toward the spot where the Indian had disappeared. Cursing, still chewing his pipe, Hoss Thief struggled back aboard. Joe raced forward to where the mules were tearing at their ropes. It took a minute to quiet them, and black Jacob had to have his nose petted before he quit trying to jump overboard. Then Joe hurried to the port sweep.

"Looks like the boiler blew," he called to Hoss Thief. "Get on that sweep. We got to pick up those people."

They grabbed the handles of the sweeps, ran against them, shoving the clumsy raft across the current. Joe was thinking of what he had said before, about the *Annie O'Hara* being like a white mare that raced past his turtle of a raft. And a turtle never seemed to stumble.

The two halves of the packet drifted slowly downstream. There were three men on the after section, waving their arms frantically. On the bow were a dozen, clinging to the port rail as the starboard side slanted deeper into the river. Joe ran his sweep forward, lifted it out, dragged it back, ran forward again.

He saw the men on the stern of the packet diving into the water. One seemed to be a strong swimmer; he helped another, while the third man paddled clumsily toward the raft. They had left none too soon. The stern of the *Annie O'Hara* rose up like a duck's tail and for a second the huge paddle wheel waved in the air. Then the whole thing dove straight to the bottom.

At last the raft scraped alongside the packet's bow. The stranded men swarmed aboard, began throwing out ropes to the swimmers from the after section. Joe and Hoss Thief worked frantically, shoving the raft away. They were barely clear when the remainder of the packet rolled completely over. For a moment the white keel gleamed like a giant bleached rib; then it surrendered itself to the deep.

"Much obliged, Joe Ramsey."

Joe turned. Henry O'Hara stood before him. He was not a tall man, but broad, with wide muscular arms and a powerful jaw. His black Prince Albert coat was torn and smudged, his shock of gray hair singed. He smoked a cigar, calmly, as though he had not just lost the fastest packet on the Missouri.

"Tough luck, Mr. O'Hara," Joe said. O'Hara was about fifty, and Joe had been raised to say "mister" to older men. "Funny, I'd thought your boiler was pretty good."

O'Hara laughed. "Best damn' boiler ever made. Copper riveted and—oh, hell. You couldn't blow her if you tried, except when you got gunpowder in the firewood." He turned to the deck hands from the packet. "Man those sweeps! These boys just saved our singed hides. Least you can do is let 'em sit and give orders."

HE GLANCED once around him, leaned against a wagon wheel, gnawed furiously on his cigar and regarded Joe with a hard, direct glare.

"Sure. Gunpowder. The chief engineer was loafin' around the engine room next to a stack of cord wood that was feedin' the fire box. Scratches a match on a stick of wood. All of a sudden he notices it's got a plug in it. A wooden plug that ain't made of Missouri Valley ash. He digs it out with a penknife and finds a nest of gunpowder.

"Well, the chief may not be the smartest boy in the world, but it takes him about a second to figure that there's more like that one, and likely some already in the fire box. So he goes up the ladder like the boiler had already blowed, yellin' and screamin'. Good thing he did. We got to the bow just before she blew."

"Might be a—well, some business rival?" Joe asked.

O'Hara laughed. "Don't be afraid to say it. Mel Durkis had some gunpowder-loaded firewood put in our cord stacks." He reached into the pocket of his burned and torn black coat, fished out a cigar, shoved it at Joe. Joe wasn't used to the luxury of a good cigar. Timidly, he bit off the end and lit it.

"I guess it might have been Durkis," he said.

O'Hara laughed again, then bit savagely on his cigar. "I'm goin' to take Mel Durkis by the collar, soon's we get to Fort Pierre, goin' to bat his face into the ground until it's flat." He shewed his cigar for a moment, knitting his heavy brows at the thought. Suddenly he leaned close, jammed a wide thumb into Joe's belly.

"Joe, how'd you like to make a half-million dollars in two weeks?"

Joe smiled and blew out a stream of cigar smoke. "I've never done much worryin' about that sort of thing."

O'Hara leaned close, his eyes flickering around, as though expecting to be overheard. "Durkis has won this round, Joe. He had to push me out, since I had the only boat in competition with him. I knew it'd come, because I saw the same thing happen to the wagon trains that tried to buck him. Well, he's got the river now. But we're goin' to slam right back at him. We're goin' to hit him on land, and hit him hard."

"We?" Joe said.

"We. You and me, Joe Ramsey. From now on, you and me are fifty-fifty partners, and in a few weeks we'll have Mel Durkis's freight empire busted like the rotten melon it is!" He thumbed back toward the spot where the *Annie O'Hara* had been. "That was small peanuts, Joey. In two weeks, a million dollars for O'Hara and Ramsey!"

Joe eyed him suspiciously. "I'm a four-mule-one-wagon freighter, Mr. O'Hara. What do you want me for? Even if you were broke you couldn't get any cash—"

O'Hara cut him off with a laugh. "If I were broke? I'm so broke it's pitiful! I rent that house in Pierre and I had no insurance on the boat. My daughter has a string of pearls worth a couple thousand dollars. That's it! That's the O'Hara fortune! You got a wagon and four mules, Joey, a bank account. All I got is a string of pearls and some knowledge worth a million dollars. In two weeks."

Joe noticed his cigar had gone out. He scratched a match on a wagon tire, touched it to the end of his cigar. He looked straight into O'Hara's eager gray eyes.

"It doesn't add up, Mr. O'Hara. You can get any of a dozen men to finance you, and they'll do it big. Especially if you're fighting Durkis. Anybody'd pay if you can tumble that pirate."

O'Hara smiled slowly, rolling the cigar around his mouth. "You saved our lives by comin' when the *Annie O'Hara* was sinkin'. Isn't that enough to make me want to take you as partner?"

"No. I'm paid already, because your men are workin' the sweeps, savin' Hoss Thief and me a lot of backaches."

O'Hara sighed. "All right, then. What I've got in mind is a freight job, four wagons and sixteen mules. I've heard you're the best mule handler on the plains. Is that enough reason?"

"No. And I don't think I'd want any of it. Four teams would be worth Durkis's time to wreck and—"

"Listen!" O'Hara pushed up close, shoving Joe back against the wagon tire. "We're going to hit Durkis so hard he'll never recover. At Blue Canyon Strike!"

"Blue Canyon! The devil, why, Durkis has Blue Canyon so sewed up—"

"Sure! So sewed up there's hundreds of miners achin' for some flour under a dollar a pound."

Stubbornly, Joe shook his head. "Just before the packet blew, I was tellin' Hoss

Thief that I felt like a turtle watching a white mare go by, when the *Annie O'Hara* passed. Well, my business is running flour, coffee, and sugar to the farm settlements upriver. I trade it for wheat and build a raft and float it downriver to Fort Pierre."

"Never get rich that way," O'Hara snapped.

"Maybe not." Joe's brown eyes were intent, fixed on the glowing end of his cigar. "But you see, Mr. O'Hara, Mel Durkis doesn't bother me. I'm the turtle, and he wants the flying white mares. I figure to pile up a stake, and after a while buy me a good jack and some mares. I'm going to breed the best mules on the plains, Mr. O'Hara."

O'Hara growled to himself. "But Joe, in two weeks we'll be back from Blue Canyon, wearin' diamonds!"

"You won't get a million out of four freight loads, not by a long shot."

"Course not! But in two weeks, a million!" O'Hara turned toward the bow of the raft, gnawing furiously at his cigar. "Mule! You're a mule! Been with 'em so long you're a long-eared bang-tailed iron-jawed damned—!" He ran out of words and stomped forward.

Joe watched him go. He puzzled up his brow and swore at himself. Any man would jump at the chance to be partner with Henry O'Hara. The man was right. He was nothing but a mule. Angrily, he pitched his cigar out into the river.

CHAPTER TWO

Bushwhacker in Town

WHEN the raft tied up at the Fort Pierre wharf, the news spread over the town like wildfire. It was a calamity to Fort Pierre; the only man who dared to compete with the Melvin Durkis Transportation Company was wiped out. The town swore and yelled about it. Only one man was calm. Henry O'Hara, who had just lost everything.

He walked down Front Street the same as always—jaunty, a long cigar angling up from his mouth. His stovepipe hat was crushed, but he doffed it to ladies, grinned merrily to friends. His fast, choppy walk was the same as ever.

There were differences, besides the crushed hat and burnt coat. He had offered to buy Joe Ramsey a drink, and so for a change, O'Hara was accompanied by a sinewey man who wore the plainsman's leather pants, plaid wool shirt and wide, floppy-brimmed hat. But the biggest change was that O'Hara wore a gun on his right hip, the same as Joe Ramsey.

Their path to the saloon of O'Hara's choice passed the long porch in front of Mel Durkis's offices and warehouse. Joe had not reckoned on that. He wanted no trouble, and as soon as he saw Durkis, he knew it would come.

Durkis was a tall, barrel-chested man, with thin red hair plastered flat to hide his balding head. His suit was of a discreet check, his hat a severe black derby. His eyes touched the two of them; amber eyes that moved to a spot, drilled into it, then glided away. He grinned now, a movement of lips that changed no other part of his face.

"Tough luck, O'Hara," he said. "I hear a boiler blew."

"Yes," O'Hara said. "Boiler blew. Exactly." He stopped in front of the porch, looking up at Durkis.

Joe glanced around him. The tone of O'Hara's voice spelled trouble. A crowd was gathering. Joe wanted no embarrassing tie-up with Henry O'Hara. It wouldn't be safe. Then he saw the two men on the porch, behind Durkis. He knew them as Charlie Kirk and Hack Fitz.

Kirk was a bruiser of a man, beefy shoulders bulging his coat. Fitz was thin, with close-set eyes, reputed to be a devil of a man with a sixgun. Both were as

close to Durkis as body lice, which was more or less what they were considered to be in the town of Fort Pierre.

"We found gunpowder in a piece of cordwood, Durkis," O'Hara said. "Found it in time so that nobody got killed."

Joe glanced around him again. The crowd had formed in a horseshoe around them. He gulped. He was now tied in with Henry O'Hara. And O'Hara's voice was too quiet, too friendly sounding. There was no mistaking it. O'Hara was picking a fight.

"Funny," Durkis said, smiling. "Wonder how that gunpowder got there?"

"Oh, that's easy," O'Hara said. "You put it there, Durkis."

The blunt accusation stilled the crowd. The silence was thick and dead. Suddenly Durkis jammed a hand into his coat pocket. The crowd scattered, seeing that, and remembering O'Hara's Colt in its open holster. But O'Hara ignored his gun.

His two big hands shot out, caught Durkis's shiny left boot. He twisted his whole body. Durkis never got the gun out of his pocket. He was pitched straight out into the street, off the four-foot high porch. With a laugh, O'Hara released the boot. Durkis yelled hoarsely, crashed face-first into the street.

Joe knew his time had come. He swung toward the porch. "I'm O'Hara's man," he barked. Hack Fitz was lunging for his underarm holster. He spun toward Joe, continued his draw, a smooth sweep of fingers, sliding his gun out, dropping into a crouch at the same time.

JOE jerked his gun instinctively, fired on the throw. Fitz's eyes bugged open, a shriek split his thin lips. His gun went flying as lead seared his hand.

Joe saw no more of him. Big Charlie Kirk was leaping through the air, diving straight at Joe. Joe felt his right shoulder go numb, and his gun dropped from nerveless fingers. The big man crushed him to the ground, powerful arms clutching for his head.

Joe squirmed, worked out from under. He came up fast, before Charlie Kirk had regained his balance. His right arm was numb, but his left wasn't. He batted a left fist into the big man's face, hit him again. His right arm was a useless, hanging thing.

But his left was good, hardened by months of work at the sweeps, a rock-tipped thing of whang leather and baling wire. It batted into Charlie Kirk's face until the big man groveled, lay down and wouldn't get up.

Joe felt a hand grip his arm. He spun. It was O'Hara.

"Good boy. Let's go." He dragged Joe away. Joe bent down, scooped up his gun. He glanced at Mel Durkis. O'Hara had done a good job. Durkis sat in the street, moaning, clutching his gashed face. He had a handsome nose, Joe remembered. It was a little too bent for beauty now.

"Glad you've decided to join me, Joey."

Joe stopped, clutched O'Hara's arm. "I sided you, Mister. But I haven't signed on your wild scheme."

O'Hara smiled slowly. "'Fraid you have, Joey. You've made your last turtle trip. You just messed up two of Durkis's best men. You got to go whole hog, Joey. Got to climb on that white mare with me!"

Joe scowled at him. "Dammit, you tricked me into this, O'Hara!"

O'Hara smiled again. He chuckled to himself. "The Missouri's going to be my creek, Joey. The plains from here to Blue Canyon will be my back yard. I'll give you a state, if you want." He laughed.

"Sure, I talk big. But now listen, Joey. All I've got in this world is a lot of brass and the ability to pick men. You're one I've picked. You know mules better'n anybody I've ever seen. I'm workin' a

hundred to one shot, Joey. Right now.

"You go buy the best twelve mules in Fort Pierre. Luke Ontrey will get wagons. He's another of my men, Joey, but don't forget, it's you that's my partner. I'll take care of the cargo. Go to the bank and tell them to credit all your money to me."

"The de—!" Joe began.

"Oh, yes you will. Midnight, Joe. Don't forget, I know a pile of things nobody else does, and they're all going to ride out tonight on that sixteen mule train! A million dollars, Joe!"

He turned away, stopped, remembering. "Put on your best bib and tucker. Dinner at my house at eight. We'll eat like gentlemen once more before we hit that trail. Luke Ontrey will take over the mules from you, in back of Ray Foster's warehouse. Put your Indian at his disposal."

He turned away, and was gone.

THE first thing Joe Ramsey did after he got out of O'Hara's whirlwind was to buy himself a stiff drink.

When he had finished it, he was so confused that he drank another.

Out of it all, he managed to sort a few things. For a certain time, he was tied or chained to Henry O'Hara. And O'Hara intended to strike at the heart of Durkis's freight monopoly with four wagonloads of food.

Joe thought of the months of work he put in, driving his mules, pushing the sweeps until he thought his back would break, running through blizzard weather. He had met Hoss Thief during that time, and hired the Indian, had divorced him from his fever for other people's horses.

Slowly and painfully, Joe had established himself—something he never thought he could do, in the days when he worked as a thirty-dollar-a-month mule skinner.

And it was all tossed like a chunk of meat into the caldron of Henry O'Hara's ambitions. And there was no way out.

There was only one thing he managed to figure out. He was riding the white mare, and he could not dismount.

He had a busy afternoon. He got a big bang out of driving his mules off the raft. He grinned at the awe he caused among the people scattered along the water front. Moving animals by raft was not an unusual thing. But when he and Hoss Thief hitched up the mules and drove them off, pulling the wagon, the four big mules as docile as kittens, then the river loafers opened their eyes. The rocking raft and the unsteady wharf panicked most draft animals. But not Joe Ramsey's mules. Surefooted, quiet, they moved gracefully over the planks and out to the muddy street.

The grain was moved up to Ray Foster's warehouse, the logs sold. Then Joe and Hoss Thief set about buying the twelve best mules in Fort Pierre. It was a hurried buying. But if they were not the best in Fort Pierre, Joe knew they were as good as any to be had. Tough, fast, and without blemishes. He was proud of the bunch he brought to the warehouse.

Luke Ontrey was a former buffalo hunter, and a former master wagon builder. The three new wagons that he brought to the warehouse made Joe's eyes pop. Oak-beamed, with giant iron-tired wheels and steel springs.

Ontrey himself was a gray-bearded old timer, a lean fellow with clear, piercing gray eyes. When Joe turned the mules over to him, he felt that Luke's big-knuckled, hairy hands were capable of finishing the job.

That evening Joe Ramsey stood in the doorway of the spacious O'Hara mansion. It was an ornate place, the porch covered with wooden scrollwork. Light blazed out between the heavy maroon curtains.

He was dressed in his best. A tight-fitting black suit, a high stiff white collar

and shoestring tie. His unruly hair was slicked down. Finally, he had a pair of new patent leather shoes that hurt his feet.

He was not comfortable. But he had heard how the O'Haras lived and he could see their handsome home. And Anne O'Hara was openly acknowledged as the town's beauty. Joe did not hope to impress Anne or her father with his dress; it was only that he expected to be less uncomfortable and less ill at ease in the black suit than in buckskins.

The door flung open. "Step right in," O'Hara flung at him. He was smiling, his gray hair now neatly brushed, his suit a well-tailored black, fitting well to his wide shoulders. "You might's well see the O'Hara place before we get dispossessed, Joey. The lease is up in a few days. Got Annie a small place to live until you and me come back with a wagonful of greenbacks."

He took Joe's arm, half-dragged him through a hallway lined with bronze statues and into an enormous parlor. The furniture gleamed, reflected the light of dozens candles, set in many-armed silver candelabras.

"We had a bellywhack full of servants up to tonight," O'Hara said. "I let 'em go and told 'em I'd hire 'em again when I'm flush." He ushered Joe into a high-backed chair, stiff with brocade, and poured whiskey from a silver decanter on the sideboard. "Annie!" he called. "Joe Ramsey's here."

Joe glanced at the elegance around him. So this was how a million dollars lived! He knew that O'Hara was not trying to impress him. O'Hara did not try to disguise the fact that he had started without money; that often he had no money, as at present.

HE HAD glimpsed Anne O'Hara several times around Fort Pierre. But when she walked through the archway, he was completely unprepared. The midnight black hair swept up on top of her head, the large gray eyes, the alabaster skin. He could see a fair amount of it, too, for her long green silk dress was cut low, showing her firm, wide shoulders and her upper bosom.

She was as tall as her father. There was much of O'Hara about her—the piercing gray eyes, the wide chin and aggressive shoulders. But there was a softness, too, a slender, lithe figure that her father did not possess.

"Good evening, Mr. Ramsey," she said. She strode toward him with a rustle of silk, a white bare arm outstretched. Joe fumbled nervously to his feet, took her hand. She smiled directly at him, then the smile was gone, and her gray eyes raked his face. He almost forgot he was holding her hand, he was so taken back by that imperious stare.

"She's a black Irish beauty, eh, Joe? The black Irish shouldn't trouble you. Just treat 'em like mules, which is what they are. You can't beat 'em except when they need it."

She shot her father a reproachful glance. "It's a little annoying to be classed with mules, Dad." She sat on the edge of a chair, her chin high.

"Mules are fine animals," Joe said. "It's not the worst thing, to be classed with mules. They're tougher'n horses and they got more ornery spirit than horses."

Anne O'Hara smiled slowly. "I suppose then, a mule skinner should be capable of handling certain types of women?"

"The Black Irish kind, anyway," O'Hara said. He stood up, paced across the room, hands clenched behind his back.

Joe glanced at the girl. She was staring at him, her gray eyes cool, the heavy black lashes steady. Her shoulders were straight, her back stiff.

"I understand you were reluctant to take my father's offer of a partnership,

Mr. Ramsey," she said. "There are many men around Fort Pierre who would take his offer eagerly. Men with a lot of money. Men of substance."

Joe absorbed that, and he didn't like it. "Maybe I'm not exactly a man of substance, Miss O'Hara." His voice was deep, almost a growl. "For some reason your dad hornswiggled me into this deal, and I can't crawfish out of it. Durkis has got to be busted before I can go back to my kind of business. So that's that, if'n you like it or not."

The girl's lips compressed into a narrow tight line. She put a slender white hand to her throat, as though to touch the pearls that were no longer there.

"My father took you as partner for reasons that you'll discover later," she said, her voice tight with anger. "Remember, we've put every cent into this venture, too. My pearls, dad said, were worth a mule an inch. You should be pleased to take part—"

Joe broke in angrily. "Just about as pleased as a wildcat eatin' the bait that made him get his foot in the trap."

Henry O'Hara stopped his pacing, laughed at the two of them. "Treat her like a mule, Joey. That's what—"

His voice dropped off. He had glanced toward the window next to him. His eyes seemed to bug, his fists clenched. Then the window exploded in his face, the roar of a sixgun crashed into the room. Henry O'Hara spun, slumped to the floor, his hand clutched over his side, where crimson blood flowed out over his white waistcoat.

For a second there was only the sound of falling glass, the acrid stink of gunpowder in the room. Then Joe vaulted to his feet. He heard Anne O'Hara cry out. He plunged toward the door, fumbling under his tight coat for his gun.

He yanked it as he swung through the hallway, bolted out to the porch. He raised his gun, leveled it as a figure that

scampered away through the bushes. His gun roared. The pounding footsteps faded into the distance.

CHAPTER THREE

Blood on Little River

THE NEXT hour turned the quiet dinner party into a houseful of scurrying people. A doctor was called, friends of Anne's pushed in, the city marshal scampered in to make his investigation. Joe helped carry the wounded man to a bedroom, then felt useless as a fifth leg on a mule. An hour later, Luke Ontrey came to the door.

The old buffalo hunter stood there in his leather trail clothes, gray beard rotating slowly in tune with his wad of tobacco.

"Heered about it," he muttered. "Got to see the boss."

Joe drew him off next to a bronze statue in the hall.

"'Fraid we can't make the trip, Luke. He's got a bullet still in him and lots of guts that's half chewed to pieces. He's conscious, though."

"Best see him," Ontrey said, looking around for a place to spit. He moved to the open door, banged a dollop of juice out into the yard. "Got all four wagons loaded, mules hitched."

Joe led him upstairs to the bedroom where the doctor was working on Henry O'Hara. They pushed in. O'Hara's face was white with pain. The doctor was bandaging a gaping wound in his side.

"Hello, Luke," the injured man said. His voice was strained, weak. "Doc, leave us two minutes. This is awful important."

The doctor glanced at Anne, who was sitting on the edge of the bed. She nodded to him. He shrugged, went outside and closed the door.

"Durkis is pullin' his train out tomorrow afternoon, Henry," the bearded plainsman said. "Seein' as how we got to have a right sharp lead on him, and seein' as how there's no chance in the world you'll be able to go—"

"You're going, Luke. And Annie. You're going with them. You understand why?"

"Yes," she said.

Joe spun toward the injured man. "Devil you say! A woman on the trail to Blue Canyon? You know damn well we'll have to fight Durkis somewhere along the trail! No woman—"

Anne O'Hara stood up, leaned over and kissed her father. "I have to go, Joe. There's no point in making the trip if dad or I don't go."

Joe grabbed her arm. "Why? Luke and I can take that freight load out there. No need for—"

She smiled slowly at him. "There is a need. You don't understand. Good bye, Dad."

As they shoved him out the door, Joe scratched his head. It didn't make sense. Not a darn bit of sense.

They left the house by the back door. The three of them hurried across town, keeping to the darkest streets. Behind the Foster warehouse were the four teams and wagon, the sixteen mules snorting and pawing the earth. Three men appeared from the shadows—Hoss Thief and two lean plainsmen.

"Move slow and quiet, boys," Luke Ontrey whispered. "We're shakin' out of Fort Pierre."

Joe and Hoss Thief climbed onto their own lead wagon. Joe eased off the wagon brake, clucked to the mules. The heavy wagon creaked off, a muffled straining of timbers and slapping of harness leather in the silence of the night. The ground was soft and the mules' shod feet made only faint plops.

In a half hour Joe felt the tension leave his shoulders. The lights of Fort Pierre were behind. Before them stretched the open plain.

THEY kept due west, steering across the trackless sea of grass by the North Star. At dawn they sighted the bluffs over Little Green River. Hoss Thief had been sleeping the last half of the night. Joe shook him awake.

"You take the reins a while, Hoss Thief. We might make a muddy crossing, and I figure to put these fancy duds away." He growled, half to himself, "Got to keep the Sunday clothes lookin' handsome, with this O'Hara crowd around."

He handed the reins to the Indian and began skinning out of the black suit, replacing the tight patent leather shoes with moccasins, footwear so well broken in that they felt like no more than callouses on his bare feet.

When they headed down the clay banks to the river ford, Joe took the reins. "Jacob, you black-hided old rascal," he called, "you lean a mite upriver when that current hits you." He snubbed the mules tight as they went down the slope, gave them their heads when they touched the edge of the water.

Sure-footed, Joe's mules danced nimbly into the river, without stumbling once on the shifting sand. They slogged evenly through the shallows, went in to their bellies when they hit the current, churned doggedly, yanked the big wagon through it, out to the other bank without a trace of disorder.

"That's the way, boys!" Joe called out. He drove them to a grassy spot fifty yards from the water, jerked the brake on and hopped off the wagon. With smooth teamwork, he and Hoss Thief skinned them out of harness. In a moment the mules were prancing off, whinnying. Black Jacob flung himself down, rolled over twice and raced for the river.

"That's a tricky crossing, Hoss Thief," Joe said. "Let's watch and see how the others take it." The Indian grunted his agreement, and they turned toward the river.

They were surprised to see Anne O'Hara driving the second wagon. Still in the green silk dress, her hair losing its upswept perfection and tumbling down in disarray, she handled the four lines in one hand, the whip in the other. Luke Ontrey rode a buckskin pony beside the four-mule team, keeping them upstream.

Joe noted that Anne's slender white fingers were tight on the reins, but as the team bellied into the current she was tense, half-rising from the seat, leaning to the right to put weight on the reins and tugging the mules heads upstream. They floundered; one lost his footing.

Luke Ontrey hurried his pony over, jerked the mule's head up. Then they caught the rise of the bank, and the girl struggled to stay on the seat as the wagon wallowed through the twisting current.

"I think mebbe I seen better work," Hoss Thief grunted. "Only not from a squaw."

Joe nodded, walked forward to meet the girl. Better handling, yes. But as Hoss Thief had said, not from a squaw. He walked up to the side of the wagon. She pulled the brake on, turned to face him.

"What do you mean by stopping here! We've got a long trip to make and we must get a lead on Durkis!" Her eyes flamed with anger, and she shoved some stray locks of black hair up on her head. A futile gesture. And the green dress was becoming dirty, and in one place, torn. Her clothes did not serve as well on the prairie as in the drawing room.

"Got to rest the mules," Joe said, grinning. "I never run 'em over eight hours at a stretch. If we do that they'll prance into Blue Canyon Strike with their ears stickin' out like carrots."

She let out a gasp of anger, squared her bare white shoulders. She set her jaw hard, and Joe saw the resemblance between it and her father's stubborn chin.

"Harness your mules!" she snapped.

"Who do you think is giving orders here?"

"I am," Joe said, squaring his own jaw. "You can't drive mules like hosses, Miss O'Hara. If you treat 'em right, they'll outwork any hoss you can name. But these longears got to be coddled at the right time."

HER eyes blazed, and her hand clutched the long whip. "Why you—!" She lost control then, swung the whip out in a wide arc. Joe grinned. He was too close for a whip to hurt him. He reached up, grabbed the heavy rawhide, and jerked.

She was half-standing, all her weight and fury flung behind the whip. She was off balance, and he jerked her clean off the wagon seat, let go the whip, and caught her arms. He eased her to the ground. Her arms, soft and sturdy, felt good in his hands.

"You—you mule skinner!" she cried. She turned and marched off. Joe grinned after her, and then began unharnessing the mules from her wagon.

Luke Ontrey came up a few minutes later, leading his buckskin pony. "Joe, whyn't you ride this cayuse off and cut for trail. I'm plumb saddle sore. I'll stretch my legs by walkin' up top o' the bluffs and takin' a gander around." The old buffalo hunter banged a dollop of tobacco juice to the ground. "If you hear this cannon blow off, you'll know they's trouble comin', and cut back for camp." He patted the .45-70 Sharps buffalo gun that was cradled in his arms.

Joe grinned at him. "I'll hear it if I'm inside two miles, Luke." He slid into the saddle.

"You'll hear it," Luke said, punctuating the words with another dollop of juice. "And somebody'll likely feel it. I've killed buff' at a mile with her, and I've heard tell of boys that claimed a kill at two miles." He strode off then, up toward the grassy bluffs that rose up behind the river.

Joe kicked the pony with a moccasined heel and trotted it down along the river. He glanced back, and frowned with surprise. Anne O'Hara and Hoss Thief were standing apart from the rest of the drivers, talking confidentially. Rather, the girl was talking, and the Indian was nodding in his quiet, dignified way. Joe decided that he was definitely opposed to secretive women, proud women, and Miss O'Hara in particular.

He rode along the river bank, leaning close to the ground, searching for sign. Tiny deer prints marked the bank, and there was some buffalo sign. He rode for fifteen minutes, and finally satisfied himself that nobody had crossed this part of Little Green River for some time. And since it was one of the likeliest places to ford, he decided that Durkis' men were not yet ahead of him.

He turned back, rode the horse at an easy lope. Up on top of the bluff he saw Luke Ontrey, standing there with the long Sharps rifle in the crook of his arm, the wind tossing his gray beard.

Joe heard splashing. He came out from behind a clump of willows. In the river he glimpsed the smooth curves of a white back, and Anne O'Hara's black hair flowing down over it. There was a startled cry. The girl ducked. She turned around angrily, water up to her chin.

"Haven't you any manners at all? Sneaking up on a lady in her bath!"

Joe laughed. "Sorry. Accident."

Her eyes flashed. "Accident! Get out of here! You—you mule skinner!"

Joe hooked a leg over the saddle horn. He drew makings from his pocket and began building a cigarette, peering at her from under the floppy brim of his hat. There was a wry grin on his face.

"Miss O'Hara, I hate to embarrass a lady."

"Then get out of here!" she screamed.

He lit his cigarette, pointed it to a clump of bushes. "Lady, you just finish your bath behind them. I figure to talk. I got you in a spot where you got to listen."

SHE moved through the water, frowning and muttering at him. When she was hidden by the bushes he heard the splashing again.

"Miss O'Hara, I mean Annie. Don't mind if I call you Annie?" There was no reply. "Well, Annie, I want to know why your dad hooked me into this outfit. And I want to know how he figures to make a million dollars out of the trip."

She laughed, a clear ringing laugh that only taunted him.

He growled, "And you tell me what you were confabing with Hoss Thief about, back at the wagons!" He found himself getting mad now. The secretive nature of the whole deal with O'Hara was getting under his skin.

"You're being silly," she said. She laughed again. "There's a time to answer questions. This isn't it."

Joe smoked his cigarette, angrily, twitching ashes off with impatient fingers. He noticed her green dress lying over a bush. "Annie, you got to answer my questions or you won't get this dress. I'm goin' to set here and watch it."

She didn't answer that. He could see the bushes moving. She made no attempt to get the dress. Then suddenly she burst through the bushes.

She was wearing a hickory shirt, denim pants and moccasins.

"New clothes," she said. "Hoss Thief bought them in town. His only extras. I picked on him, because he's the smallest one in the caravan."

Joe laughed. "He's too small, in places."

She frowned, grabbed her dress and set off for the caravan. So, Joe thought, that

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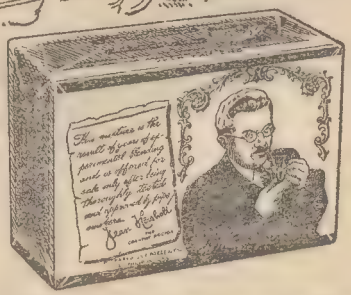

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was why she had the confab with Hoss Thief! To borrow clothes. Maybe the rest of the things he didn't understand were like that. He touched a heel to the buckskin's ribs, rode up alongside her.

Suddenly he leaned down, hooked a lean arm around her waist. She let out a yell as he hoisted her to the saddle. He moved back to ride on the buckskin's rump, let her take the reins.

"Sometimes you got to treat women like mules," he said. "Treat them sudden."

He found that her hair was hanging free now, and most of it was in his face.

"Yes," she said, her voice quiet. "Treat them sudden. Always remember that a woman is a mule and act accordingly. But remember that mules act sudden sometimes, too." She jammed both her elbows back, and they crashed into Joe's chest. His precarious position wasn't designed for that. He parted company with the horse, landed on the ground with a thump.

She didn't look back. She kicked her moccasins into the horse's ribs, galloped him of. He scowled, watched her disappear, back straight and stiff, black hair streaming in the wind.

Joe was thinking of the time Jacob, his black mule, had kicked him. A fly had been annoying him. Joe wondered what had annoyed Anne O'Hara.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Million—in Blood!

IT WAS about noon when Luke Ontrey rode up alongside Joe's wagon. "Hoss Thief," he said. "Might be you could ride herd for a piece while I talk to Joe here."

The Indian obligingly took the buckskin. Ontrey climbed up beside Joe.

"You haven't told me," Joe said, "if you saw anything from that bluff top back at Little Green River, Luke."

"No-o, I ain't," the plainsman said slowly. "With Miss Anne back there at the camp site, I figured to hold my talk." He spat once at the mules' tails. "Six wagons, a good eight hours behind. Couldn't see no more'n the wagons, even when I used that spyglass Henry gave me. Too dum far."

"We can lead them all the way to the canyon," Joe said. He began making a cigarette. "They can't have any better mules than we've got."

The oldster spat again. "Reckon not. Like I said, all I could see was wagon tops. And them wagon tops is eight hours away. Only thing, though—"

"Outriders?" Joe said. With calm fingers he rolled his cigarette closed, lit it off, stared at the glowing end. "I wouldn't put it past Durkis to have his men belly up through the grass and pot-shoot our mules."

Luke sprayed tobacco juice over the side of the wagon. "We-ell, I ain't so worried about that. My Sharps'll keep 'em off where they can't hit many ol' mules. What I'm worried for is the canyon. You ever been to Blue Canyon Strike, Joe?"

Joe shook his head.

"She's a narrow twisty canyon leadin' through to the strike. With wagons, they just ain't no other way to get there. I figger as how they'll send outriders ahead and mebbe try to stop us from goin' through. And it'd only take a couple of men hid out on them canyon walls to do it. They'd just knock down a few mules and then pick us off between smokes."

"Of course, we haven't seen any outriders yet," Joe said hopefully.

"No-o," Luke said. "We ain't—yet." And with that he closed the subject, chomping his cud of tobacco as they rolled on through the grass.

Ontrey's buckskin was the only horse with the train, and as a result he got a heavy workout. Joe rode him out that evening, as the wagon train drew into a

square next to a willow-fringed creek. He cut the pony out in the wide sweep of the rolling grasslands around the camp-site. It was planned that he would roam, watching for sign of Durkis' men until the moon came. Then he would get a hasty supper and the caravan proceed.

It was pitch dark as he rode through the willows. His Winchester rattled in the saddle boot that had been made for Ontrey's huge Sharps. He glanced at the skyline of each rolling hill, hoping to see riders if they were there, and hoping they were not there. Suddenly his horse snorted. Across the prairie came the deep-throated bellow of Luke Ontrey's buffalo gun.

He jerked his pony around, pounded it back toward the camp. The moon cast its first glow then, and he saw it dance off the white wagon tops in gleaming blobs. A rifle barked, then another. And then he saw them, a dozen riders galloping toward the wagon train.

Flame spurted from under a wagon. The riders answered it with flashing guns, riding straight for the wagons. A yell came out of their midst, and to a man they leaped from their horses, crouched in the grass, firing.

Joe reined up. Something was wrong. The riders had stopped advancing, and were merely firing rapidly at the wagons. He knew they were hitting nothing. Ontrey and the rest were well holed-up behind sacks of flour and beans, their five rifles blasting back at the attackers with undiminished vigor. He was sure that something was wrong. This was a feint attack, to draw attention. He felt sweat pop out on his forehead. What was their real purpose?

HE REINED his pony around to the side, yanked his Winchester out of the saddle boot. The only thing he could do was to make it uncomfortable for the men in the grass. He levered, fired. He blasted three more times. A couple of guns answered him, and the raking fire from the wagons increased.

He grinned to himself as he fired the last shot out of the gun. The attackers were pinned down! With trembling fingers he stuffed more shells into his rifle. Then, from his right, came a slash of flame, the crash of a gun. The buckskin under him screamed and crashed to the ground.

With a yell he threw himself free, rolled, came up. A horseman loomed against the sky, galloping hard. A big man crouched over his horse's neck, a Colt in his fist. He saw the wide scarred face. Charlie Kirk!

The Colt roared. Joe felt a bullet slam his shoulder, spin him. "Yah!" Kirk bellowed out. "Have some hoof, Mister Ramsey!"

Grunting with pain, Joe jammed a shell into the breech of his gun, whirled. The pony was twenty feet away now, and Charlie Kirk's sixgun was raised. Joe swung, levered his Winchester and fired from the hip. The flame roared out in the horse's face. With a scream of terror it lunged to the side. But Charlie Kirk did not lunge. The slug caught him in the chest and he twisted, hurtled off his horse. As the pony slashed by, the big man crashed into Joe Ramsey. They went to the ground in a bruising tangle of arms and legs. Frantically, Joe jerked away from the big man. He pushed to his feet, and found that Charlie Kirk had not tried to dive on him; he was dead when he left the saddle.

Slowly, Joe turned toward the outlaw band. They were mounting now, scattering off through the grass, their retreat punctuated by blasts of rifle fire from the wagons. Joe stood there a minute as they faded into the distance; then he turned and paced back to the camp site.

The rifle firing quieted as he paced on. Half-way, he heard a sixgun roar. He stopped. It was from the wagons. An-

other shot boomed out. He realized then that mules were screaming. It was not their usual raucous braying, but screams that seemed wrung from their very bellies. He felt cold sweat on his face, and he knew he had been right.

The attack was a cover for something else. The sixgun blasted a third time. He raced up to the wagons, was about to dart inside the circle. A slender figure ran out, grabbed his arm.

"No! Joe, don't go in!" It was Anne, her gray eyes round, her fingers clawing into his arm. "A man sneaked in and hamstrung four mules—but don't go in there—you don't want to see—"

He broke from her, plunged through. Inside the square of wagons the moon shone brightly. Among the huddled, braying mules, several lay still. One was on the other side of them, thrashing, trying to rise to his four feet, screaming. Hoss Thief and Luke Ontrey were struggling with the animal, trying to throw it down.

Joe gulped and turned away. It was Jacob! His favorite, the sleek, high-stepping Jack. He turned away when they threw the animal to the ground. A gun roared. Then there was only the frightened whinnyings of the other mules.

He walked slowly to where Hoss Thief and Ontrey stood, Luke with a smoking Colt in his hand.

"Thanks, Luke," he said. "I—I couldn't have—done it."

Luke nodded and mouthed some words he would not say aloud with Anne O'Hara present. Finally he growled, "We got the son that done it!"

Joe saw that the two drivers were holding a tall thin man. Hack Fitz! As he came closer Joe saw that Fitz's yellow eyes were rolling in terror, his mouth gaping open.

"That attack was to make us p'int our guns the wrong way," Ontrey said. "Just so's Fitz here could sneak in and hamstring our critters." He pulled a long-bladed skinning knife from his belt. "Here's what he done it with."

JOE glanced at Jacob, lying dead on the ground. He thought of the mule's soft mouth, of the way he would tremble with high-strung energy, then relax when Joe touched that soft mouth. Red was in front of his eyes when he turned toward Fitz.

"Who ordered this?" His voice came out thin, as though there was no heart left in him for talk.

Fitz seemed to misunderstand the pain in Joe's voice. "You can't talk nothin' out of me," he snarled. His thin face stiffened and his eyes narrowed. "You wouldn't kill a man without givin' him a chance."

Joe sighed. "No. We wouldn't kill a man." He turned to the Indian. "Hoss Thief, take that skinnin' knife and show Fitz how the Sioux make people talk."

There was a scream. It was Anne O'Hara, her eyes wide with horror. "No! Joe, don't—let him!"

Joe gripped her wrist tight in his hand. "Hoss Thief, hamstring that devil! Let him crawl back to Durkis that way!" He grabbed both the girl's wrists. She closed her eyes, buried her face in his shoulder.

The Indian took the skinning knife from Luke, stropped it twice on his leather pants. "Turn 'em upside down," he grunted ot the two drivers. "I cut his legs."

"No!" Fitz screamed, struggling frantically against the two drivers that held him. "Durkis made me do it! I didn't want to! He made me!"

Hoss Thief stopped before him, flicked the blade of the knife in his face.

"Where's Durkis?" Joe said.

"He's with the wagon train! He rode out of Fort Pierre with us because people were saying he had O'Hara shot. He thought it wasn't safe." The man was broken with fear, blurting out all he knew.

"He don't want to fight you. He had me cut the mules' tendons so you couldn't get to Blue Canyon!"

Hoss Thief signalled to the drivers to turn Fitz around. As they turned the screaming, struggling man, Hoss Thief hit him behind the ear with the knife hilt. Fitz fell into a silent heap.

"Him goin' to sleep all night now," the Indian grunted.

Joe felt Anne O'Hara clinging to him. Her hands trembled. He put an arm around her shoulders and thought how funny it was that the proud Anne O'Hara should be seeking his protection.

"Joe," she whispered, "would Hoss Thief have—?"

Joe glanced at the Indian and grinned. For once the Indian's lean, hatchet-like face broke into a thin smile.

"Some of the Sioux would do that sort of thing, Anne. The same kind of Indian that Hack Fitz is a white man. Now do you think Hoss Thief would have done a thing like that?"

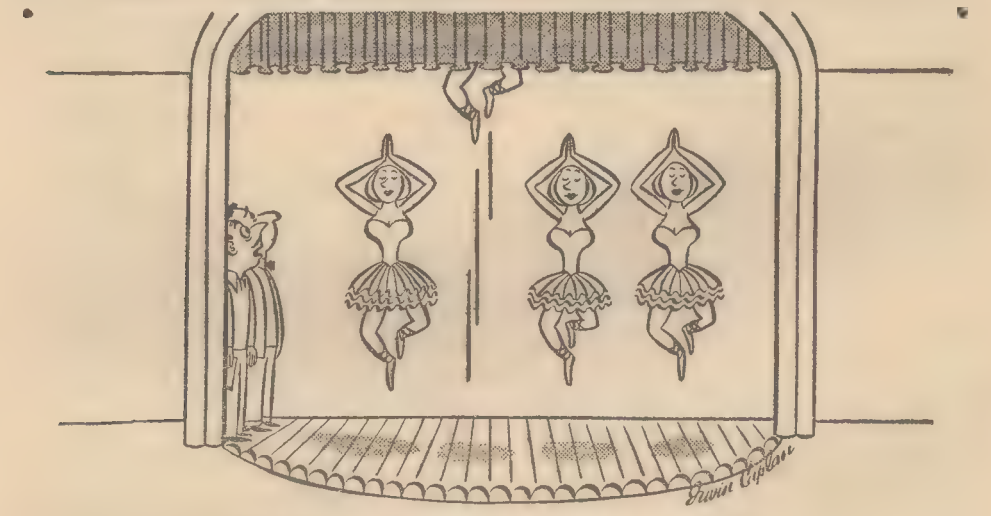
She looked up at the Indian. He was still smiling, shyly. She smiled back at him. "I'm sorry, Hoss Thief," she said. "I shouldn't doubt you. Here I am wearing your clothes and—I'm sorry."

Luke Ontrey broke in then. "Miss Anne you let go your hold on Joe. We got to hitch up. Take a while to rig three mule hitches."

Joe glanced once at the four dead mules. "Let's get to work," he said. He turned to Anne. "You know, I was thinkin' maybe of sloping out on this deal. But I tell you, lady. I'm ridin' the O'Hara white mare until we bust Mel Durkis wide open!"

It was dawn of the third day when they sighted the mountains. They bulged up black against the western sky. The dull green of the plains was like a sea lapping at their feet.

The little caravan wound over a rise, four specks of white canvas, like lice among the endless buffalo grass. Each wagon was pulled by three mules hitched abreast, weary mules, each three doing the extra work of a dead brother. The



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six people in the caravan were weary too, weary from days of staring at the horizon, searching for the riders they knew would come, yet never knowing when. With Ontrey's horse dead, they had no outrider to bring warning of danger.

Joe rode beside the girl that day, his eyes red from lack of sleep. They watched the mountains come closer, tried to pick out the mouth of Blue Canyon.

"They know too much about us," Joe said. "Maybe we shouldn't have left Fitz behind. Now Durkis knows we got only five men and a girl and four mules too few. Durkis will line his men up along these canyon walls and pick us off as we go through."

"Don't be so gloomy," she said. "Dad would be figuring up a way. I used to have better ideas about you. I thought of you as partner with my father, with the chance of folding the Durkis empire and coming out of it like—like kings!" She clenched his arm with both hands, her eyes wide and fixed on his face. "Do you see? What I mean is—"

Joe growled, shook her hands off. He yanked tobacco and papers out of his pocket, began twisting a cigarette. "Lady, you'd even marry me to keep the empire in the family. That's what you'd do." He laughed. "Hell, what empire am I talkin' about? Might get fifteen or twenty thousaid out of this cargo."

"Then a million," she said. "I'm not joking. A million."

"All right," Ramsey said. "A million." His voice was charged with irony. "And do you mind telling me why Henry O'Hara picked a mule skinner to share a million dollars like he did—that doesn't even exist?"

"No!" she said. "I won't tell you!" And she jumped off the wagon, ran back to another one.

Joe cursed softly as he re-lit his cigarette.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gilt-Edged Bullets!

ALL that afternoon the tension built until it was a knot in the pit of his stomach. At noon they sighted the Durkis train, five miles behind, and moving steadily, open, toward Blue Canyon. It was gaining on them. Joe knew his mules were good, but three to a wagon could never match the four that Durkis had.

They might reach the canyon at the same time, but the Durkis train would go through, under the protection of Durkis rifles. At mid-afternoon they saw a party of horsemen gallop away from the caravan, head toward the canyon. There looked to be about a dozen of them.

Joe was on the point of giving up hope. The entrance would be completely blocked. It was plain why Durkis had not attacked them on the trail. He couldn't get men to ride into another storm of lead.

The mouth of the canyon was wide, flanked by groves of black spruce. Then the canyon walls narrowed and it became a twisting slot through the hills. Six miles, and forcing the caravan through would be like putting a rope through the eye of a needle.

At dusk Joe halted the caravan in the spruce grove to the left of the canyon mouth. Ontrey left them to scout the canyon. None of Durkis' riders could be seen, so Joe decided to hold up until they could be located. Besides, the mules were groggy from overwork, and they had to rest.

Joe sat leaning against the bole of a spruce, watching the white tops of the Durkis' train draw toward the canyon mouth. He nodded faintly when Anne walked up to him, her shoulders stiff and her jaw pushed out stubbornly.

"Joe, we've got to go through."

He shook his head. "No we don't.

We're plumb broke and we owe lots of money in Fort Pierre because your dad got most of this cargo on credit. We can't bust Durkis this trip. I've got no intention of pushin' through that canyon. It's suicide."

"There's a million dollars at the other end of the canyon, Joe."

He growled, yanked makings from his pocket. He scowled and would not look at her while he built the quirly. "I'm sick of hearin' about a million dollars that don't exist," he growled.

"All right," she said. "I'll tell you. Durkis' mine stock, M D Mine, he calls it, is up for sale. We can get it for what we sell this cargo for. The stock goes begging at five dollars a share. A week from now, it will be worth five hundred a share."

He lit his quirly, stared out to where Durkis' wagons were moving slowly toward the canyon mouth. They were too far, but he fancied he could see Durkis on the seat of the lead wagon, his big shoulders hunched over, shouting at his men to hurry. The mules were not working well, Joe noticed. They had been pushed too hard. He turned to the girl.

"If the shares go at five dollars, there's no gold in the mine."

She grabbed his shoulders. "There is!" She shook him, angrily. "That's why we've got to get through there! The only way we can get enough money to clean out those shares is by selling this cargo. That mine is full of gold!"

Luke Ontrey paced up then. "They've set the block a half-mile up the canyon. Hosses tied there, and a dozen riflemen waitin' behind rocks for whatever comes." His voice had the same depth of hopelessness that Joe felt. "I got Hoss Thief and the two drivers watchin' for trouble. Reckon I'll go down and watch Durkis's train come through." He turned and walked toward the edge of the spruce grove, his steps heavy and tired.

JOE watched him go. "How do you know there's gold in M D Mine?"

"Fred Jurger wrote to dad. He was one of the miners that made the strike. Durkis was there at the time. Five miners found it, and Jurger was one of them. Durkis had Charlie Kirk and Hack Fitz dynamite it closed, killing the four men working in it. The news hadn't gotten out.

"Well, in the beginning, Durkis had promoted the mine pretty hard, and miners had bought a lot of the stock. So now that he had struck gold, he wanted all the stock. He found Fred Jurger had escaped the blast, and talked to him before he had a chance to spread the news. He offered to give Jurger a big share. He put up all the stock for sale, and gave Jurger money to buy it up, quietly. Jurger was to be well rewarded.

"But, Fred Jurger had been a friend of the four miners who were killed. Besides, he was an old friend of dad's. He needed money to break Durkis. He wrote dad. Dad got the letter just before the last trip he made on the packet. Either dad or I had to come, or Jurger wouldn't sell us the stock he'd picked up. He has all of it, Durkis's' stock and what he got from the other miners!"

Joe spun his cigarette away. "I believe it! A man that would hamstring mules would kill miners." He jerked to his feet. "And why did your dad pick me as partner?"

She refused to meet his eyes. "Well, you had some money, and some mules—"

"No!" He grabbed her arm. "There's more'n that. Why?" He gripped her arms tight in his lean fingers.

She smiled slowly, looked up at him. "I guess I wanted to buy you, Joe. A rich girl's whim. I used to ride my horse to where I could watch you driving your mules out of Fort Pierre. There's something magical about the way you handle animals, Joe. I was fascinated. I thought

maybe a man who could handle animals that way could—"

He laughed tightly. "So you decided to buy a mule skinner so you could look him over, eh? Make him rich, dress him up in fine clothes, and see if you want him, eh? Sure, your dad calls the Missouri his creek and the territory will be his back yard. But not even O'Haras can buy a man! Not with a million dollars!"

He turned, strode angrily toward the edge of the spruce grove. She ran after him, clutched his arm. "Joe! Joe! I know it now, I can't buy a man like that!"

He spun toward her. "Not with money. But you money-crazy O'Haras wouldn't understand that."

Her eyes seemed to narrow slightly, and she smiled. "Maybe we would, Joe. I'm an O'Hara, but I'm a woman, too." She flung her arms about his neck and he felt his mouth melt into the softness of her lips, felt her warm body crush into him. Slowly she moved her lips away. She whispered close to his ear. "I don't care if the wagons get through, Joe. If you want me without the million dollars, I'll take you and that mule ranch you talk about."

He released her. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I wonder if you'd give up that gold for me. I wonder? Now, you've got no choice."

"I would," she murmured.

He grinned at her. "We'll see. We'll see if you want a man who's a mule skinner, or a man who's a mule skinner dressed like a dude. Because that cargo is going through!" He jammed his hands in his pockets, paced for a minute. "We could take it over the mountains packed on the mules. Only we haven't enough mules. I've been thinking of that."

Luke Ontrey and Hoss Thief came up then, appearing suddenly out of the gathering dusk.

"I figger they're goin' to see what we do before they go into the canyon," Ontrey said. "Might be they're plannin' a raid. More likely, Durkis is goin' to rest his mules there for the night. It's six mile through the canyon, and his critters is plumb tuckered. He's turned 'em loose already. He figgers he's got us bottled up here, and he can take his time."

Joe was staring at Hoss Thief. The idea came to him with a flash. "Hoss Thief, how'd you like to try your hand at your old business? Not stealin', understand, just borrowin'? I think with Durkis's twenty-four mules and our twelve, we can pack our sugar and beans and coffee in to Blue Canyon Strike."

Ontrey was calculating. "Mebbe eight hundred pounds on each. Too heavy. Never take 'em over mountain trails loaded that heavy."

Joe grinned at him. "Hell, who said anythin' about goin' over the mountains? Luke, you must've done a lot of packin' when you hunted buffalos. You start loadin' our mules. Hoss Thief and I got a job to do."

He grabbed the Indian, led him off. As they paced down to the edge of the woods, they heard Ontrey starting the others on their work of loading.

THE Durkis wagons had been drawn up in a circle, with a fire burning inside. With relief, Joe saw that only one man was herding the mules over a grassy stretch a few hundred yards from the outlaw camp. The man was mounted, sitting stiffly in the saddle, casting nervous glances about. Joe grinned when he saw that. The outlaw had learned to respect things like Luke Ontrey's Sharps rifle.

"You wait here," Hoss Thief whispered. They were at the edge of the brush bordering the spruce grove. The Indian went into a crouch, moved rapidly through the open grass, toward the black mass of mules. The rider turned in his direction, and Hoss Thief disappeared. He advanced like a snake, slithering along.

Joe lost track of him, seeing only the mules and the rider, outlined against the night. Suddenly the rider jerked around. He was too late. A lithe form rose out of the grass, seemed to climb right up the horse's rump. It merged with the black silhouette of the rider, then both disappeared.

Joe caught his breath, found his fingers were knotted into fists until his hands were numb. He strained his eyes, but could see nothing. Then a man stood up beside the horse, mounted. He rode as before, stiff-backed. Slowly the grazing mules changed the direction of their movement.

If Mel Durkis happened to glance toward his herd of mules, Joe thought, he would see only a stiff-backed, anxious rider and a quiet, hungry flock of mules. Joe grinned as Hoss Thief moved the animals slowly toward the grove of spruce.

It was midnight when they finished loading the mules. Harness, halters, pieces of rope were all used to tie the packs on. The little grove bristled with mules, all braying their disgust at being loaded, some trying to roll over, others to rub the packs off against trees. Joe went among them, rubbing noses, murmuring quiet words. The braying stopped, started again in some other places.

Ontrey made a last-minute scout, and they gathered by the wagons before mounting. "Durkis and three others just rode up the canyon," he said. "I figger they aim to get the men that's up there and start some dirty work."

"Then we've got no time to lose," Joe said. "Now here's my plan. Each of you have a lightly-loaded mule. Lay flat on the load. When you see any of Durkis's men, start shootin'. Maybe we can scare these mules into running through like the devil was after them. They're plenty unhappy already. Let's go."

Joe wriggled on top of his mule, clutching his Winchester, his Colt loose in the holster. He was partly protected by the sacks of flour on each side. His long legs stuck out over the mule's tail, but that would be all right. In the dark, Durkis's men would have a hard time figuring which mules carried human cargo and which the supplies.

THE mules ambled slowly forward, Hoss Thief and the two drivers riding behind, herding them into a tight bunch. The mules brayed angrily, shaking, trying to dislodge their packs. Joe glanced back. He could see the Durkis campfire, reflected brightly on the white wagon tops.

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Then there were shouts. Somebody fired a gun off back there, and the sound of it clanged through the stone canyon walls.

"Start yelling!" Joe called out. "Get 'em into a run!"

He began shouting, and over his own voice he could hear Luke Ontrey swearing at his mule, Hoss Thief using every cuss word known to the Sioux tongue, Anne O'Hara shouting. The canyon walls narrowed, and as the closely-bunched animals began to trot, they filled it, side to side, and four deep.

"Shoot when you see 'em!" Joe yelled. He raised up a bit, steady on the heavy pack. The canyon bent, and the cavalcade swung around the bend. It widened a bit, then narrowed. Then, ahead, he saw a man on the canyon wall. He raised his rifle, blasted off a shot.

"Start shootin'!" he yelled. He heard Ontrey's big Sharps roar and the lighter clash of Winchester fire. He snaked his own Colt out, slapped the mule on the rump with it, blasted it off over the animal's head. With a scream, the mule broke into a gallop. Joe looked to each side, could see the heaving backs of thirty-six mules, the bulging sacks of flour, coffee and beans, the occasional head of a rider, and the flashes of their guns.

The man on the canyon wall fired at them twice. Joe laughed. The mules were protected by their loads, the riders hidden. A Winchester slashed flame up at the man on the canyon wall; he screamed, toppled down. The flood of mules passed over him.

"There they are!" It was Anne O'Hara's voice. Ahead, a bunch of horsemen reined up in the middle of the canyon. A streak of flame bit out from them and lead sang overhead. A mule reared up, tried to turn. His fellows rushed him on. They were all galloping now; it was a stampede, and nothing could stop it.

They closed on Durkis's men in a flash. There were men on the canyon walls; their horses were grouped, riderless, huddled next to the walls. And beside them, stood four mounted men.

The riderless horses panicked first. The black flood of mules, steal hoofs clashing on stone until it was a roar, the crashing guns—the horses could do only one thing. They fled, leaving most of Durkis's men stranded on the canyon wall.

Then Joe saw Durkis, looming up over his horse, bellowing orders. Beside him, thin Hack Fitz. The man who had ordered the hamstringing, and the man who had done it. Joe couldn't control himself. He swung up to a kneeling position, leveling his Colt.

He didn't realize that he was the only target the owlhoots had; his hat was torn off, a bullet seared down his back like a brand of fire. The nearest outlaw rider was blasting at him. The man's horse reared then, tried to run, stumbled. The black flood cut them underfoot. Only three mounted men were left.

Hack Fitz saw it, saw as Durkis saw, that the stampede had to be broken. He yanked twin Colts from his gunbelt, blasted at the wall of mules. One crashed to the ground, and its brothers flowed over it. Joe yelled out his hate for the man, and Fitz saw him. He swiveled around. Both guns roared. Joe felt an iron fist crash into his shoulder. He grunted, triggered. He saw flame streak out of his gun. It caught Hack Fitz in the shoulder, spun him around.

"You damn mule killer!" Joe heard himself screaming. Fitz was slumping in the saddle, trying to bring his guns up again. That was when Luke Ontrey's Sharps rifle bellowed. It howled into Fitz's chest, straightened him, tore him off the horse and slammed him to the canyon floor.

Joe reeled, clutched at his blasted shoulder. Then he saw Durkis, his hat gone, his thin red hair wild, heavy-bodied as he towered over his big gray horse. With

a shout he drove the gray forward, straight at Joe. A stumpy gun in his fist belched fire.

A streak of agony ran along Joe's ribs. He raised his gun and fired, saw the outlaw leader stagger, but Durkis forced his gray into the teeth of the stampede. He was bellowing words as his horse came face to face with Joe's mule. Joe raised his gun, at point-blank range, blasted.

He saw Durkis's gun roar into a furnace of flame, felt it reach up and slash his scalp. Then it was all black and blurred, and he was collapsing down on the mule's back. He heard Durkis scream, tumble from his mount.

Then it was only the pounding gallop of the mules, and it seemed to continue forever.

IT WAS very bright when he came to. He seemed to be on a couch, and sunlight streamed through an open doorway. He realized that someone was holding his hand. He looked up and saw large gray eyes, red lips half-parted in a smile. The red lips lowered, touched his.

"We did it, eh, Annie?" he said.

She nodded. "Some of Durkis's men are still running, I think." She held up a handful of papers. Yellow, rich-looking papers with green borders. He read the fancy writing. M D Mine stocks.

"Ours," she said.

"Pretty," he said. "Pretty pieces of paper."

She nodded. "They're just pieces of paper, too, Joe. Nothing solid or lasting like mules." She smiled slowly. "We sold the cargo for enough to buy four thousand shares. I put dad's two thousand in the bank, and I gave all of ours away, except these. A lot to Hoss Thief, a bunch to Luke Ontrey, a whole pile to Fred Jurger, the miner. Hoss Thief is sporting a black derby already."

"And you, Annie?"

"I kept enough so that we could start that mule raising ranch you talked about."

He drew her close to him. "You bought yourself a husband, Annie. A husband that's through ridin' the white mare."

"I hear there's lots of land in the foothills, half forest, half grass, free for the taking and—"

She said no more. Joe decided enough talking had been done already.

When Henry O'Hara rode into Blue Canyon Strike a week later, he was still pale from his wound, but getting better rapidly. He found Luke Ontrey and Hoss Thief sitting on the porch of what served as the town's best hotel. Both wore derbies now, and swallowtail coats as well.

Henry O'Hara climbed off his horse. "How'd you like to buy shares in a packet line I'm openin' on the river, boys?"

"Fine," they chorused. "Bring a pen and we'll write some checks."

O'Hara sat down beside them, rubbed the still-sore wound in his side. "The kids, I hear they're turtlin' along all right?"

"They lit into the mule ranchin' business like they was ridin' the white mare, Henry, and they said they was sorry they couldn't wait till you got here to get married. I was best man, or else Hoss Thief was. I forget. They got good champagne here."

"You can't change a mule's spots," Henry said.

"Nope. Hoss Thief, you remember to buy some more boxes of them cigars. We're runnin' low."

The Indian grunted assent, leaned back, exhaling smoke.

"Now about this packet line I'm starting boys," Henry said.

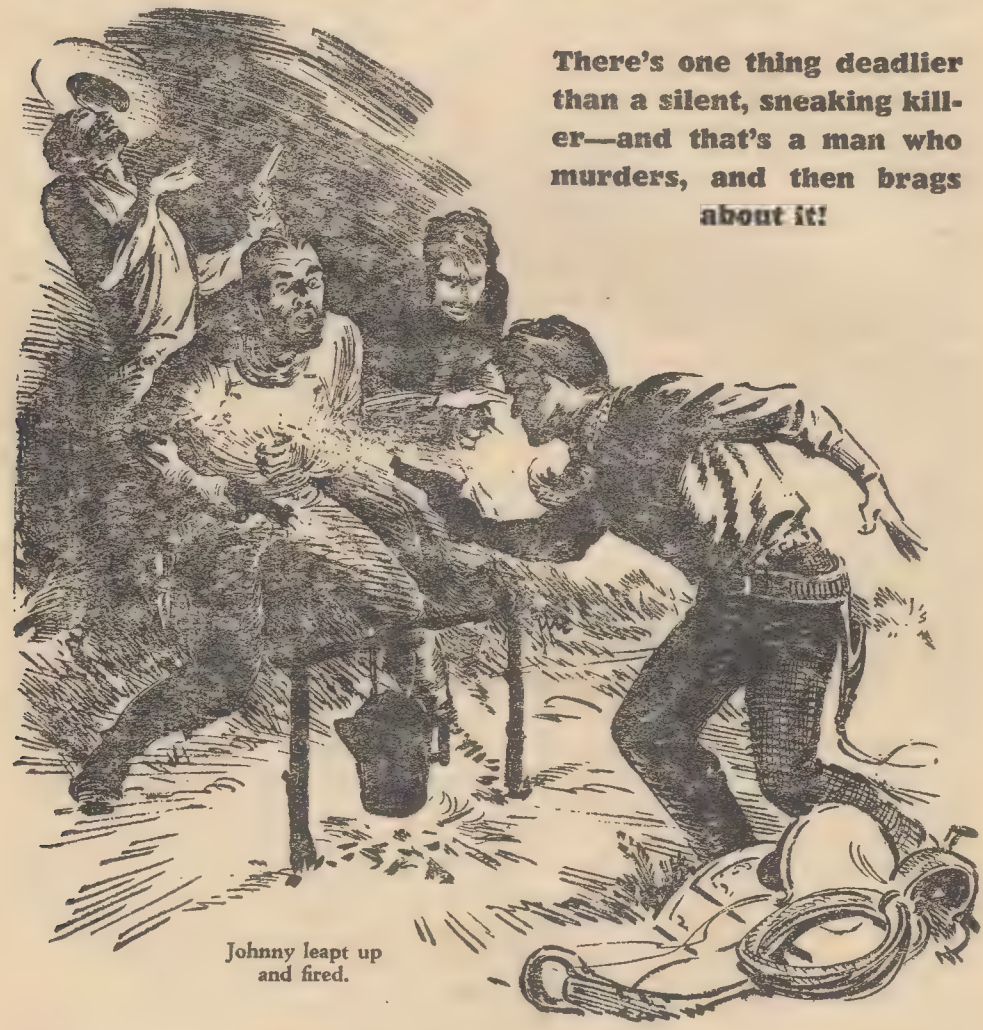
"Can't change a mule's spots," Luke chortled.

Henry O'Hara grinned. "I say you can't!"

THE END

Dead Man's Stretch

There's one thing deadlier than a silent, sneaking killer—and that's a man who murders, and then brags about it!



Johnny leapt up and fired.

THREE MEN were already hunkered around a mesquite wood fire and black coffee pot when I rode up to Buzzard Camp in Dead Man's Stretch the night I met Johnny Tanner. From the looks of the faint dust smear I'd sighted in the broken land behind me there'd be one more of us before good dark. The welcome was no more'n smallpox would get in a Comanche village but it was natural for men to be cautious in that country.

The unspeaking trio at the small camp fire on the flat shelf of the muddy creekbed were strangers to me and not too savory-looking for bunking down with. But it didn't make any difference. You get used to rubbing elbows with human cactus and driftwood after you've visited the raw market towns.

By WILL C. BROWN

I said, "Howdy, men," and added something about the coffee smelling mighty damn fine. They stood up and grunted back, watching me unsaddle and stake my dead-tired old mustang. I dragged my gear over toward the fire and pulled out some makings.

I took a quick look back toward the north for the dust smear I'd spotted earlier but by now it was too gloomy to see far. The sun hustles down in a hurry there in October.

The three of them didn't look like anybody I'd ever run across around my part of the country, although there were hundreds of the same pattern every night in the raw-meat dives of Parsons and Abilene. I was just a fagged-out cowpoke, a week late from a market drive north, anxious to get back to the LB home bunkhouse, which was still a long way southwest. All I wanted was grub and shuteye before hitting that saddle again at sunup.

Two of them gave me a surly inspection. Big men they were, their clothes trail-dirty and greasy, dark beards matted like thrash from a creek rise. The third was squat, nearly fat, with a flat red nose that might have been bashed in once with a scantling, and eyes that jerked around everywhere but straight at you.

But when you're traveling across Dead Man's Stretch you're not particular. It's a case of safety in numbers. A man'd rather bed down with his hand on his gun under his blanket all night, with strange characters around doing likewise, than sweat it out alone. Company was what you hankered for when the sun went down.

Buzzard Camp wasn't really a camp at all. It was just a common stopping place there on the south fringes of Dead Man's Stretch, about the right distance for the first night's stop south from the river. Dead Man's Stretch was what they called the country sweeping down fifty miles south of the Red.

Got its name, naturally, from the poor dead hombres they used to find out there —usually a lone ranch hand, home-bound from a market trip, his horse stolen, jeans looted, bullet in the head. Seemed like lawlessness and violence sloshed over about that far from the Territory border at the river. Territory riffraff, fugitives from the east, the wilder elements from Indian settlements, halfbreed vagrants—they'd roam south a way from the Territory and hideouts along the Red and it was no country to be alone in at night.

Somehow it was the meanest piece of fifty miles between Mid-Texas and Kansas. After the Stretch, south, you began to run into a few cowtowns and ranch houses, a little more civilization, and the river violence sort of petered out. No matter where you lived, you felt you were almost home after you'd made that first fifty miles.

So that's how it got to be a custom for trail riders to begin looking for company for the night after their first day's ride out of Catfish Crossing. The big trail outfits, moving in a bunch, were not worried. But waddies going it alone or in pairs, maybe overdue home after extra carousing around Abilene or Parsons, usually started looking for Buzzard Camp before sundown, hoping maybe they'd run into friends.

I hadn't run into any friends in these three. That was a cinch. But still, maybe they'd be better than nobody.

BESERDO they called the biggest and the oldest, the one with the thickest beard and a brass-studded gunbelt around his huge stomach. Beserdo dominated the fire and helped himself to the coffee and the other two followed suit.

The whiskered one who looked something like Beserdo they called Dug, and the spread-nose fat man who packed two old guns was referred to as Frenchy. If I could judge folks at all they had California gold camp or market-town

scum written on them in plain words. I took a tin cup from my roll and helped myself from the pot.

"I'm Joe Thomason," I offered. "LB spread, Van Horn country."

That didn't fetch any return introductions. Instead, Beserdo just twisted a little and looked at me with his bloodshot black eyes.

"Anybody behind you, stranger?" Beserdo dumped a loud gulp of the scalding stuff into a hole somewhere behind his beard thicket. "Seen you lookin' back thataway." He jerked his shaggy head north.

I was fixin' to tell them about the dust smear I'd sighted, when the dust smear itself materialized in the gloom of the mesquite scrubs in the form of hoofbeats and saddle sound. Then a horse emerged and Johnny Tanner was swinging to the ground.

We didn't know his name then, of course. We just saw a pair of long, well-booted legs stalk up to the fire, and above them a lean body that spread to good shoulders and a dark, young face.

In the fire light, up closer, the face showed a frank smile as open as a prairie morning and alert dark eyes that were pleasant enough but somehow seemed loaded with something behind them. I thought of a stud hand with two aces showing and a third solid in the hole. Or maybe just a deuce and a bluff.

It was hard to catalog him, in those first few minutes. Home-bound herd poke didn't seem to fit, for he moved assuredly and carried himself like he might have owned Texas. Yet there was a kind of taut wire out of sight in him that got you edgy once you sensed it.

The gun that filled the holster on his leg somehow looked more natural on Johnny than a gun looked on any other man, more like it was built right into him by his Maker, like an arm or a leg, and not just a chunk of steel he could take off or strap on. Really a part of him.

The first words he said were about like my own. "That coffee smells mighty damn good. Reckon this must be Buzzard Camp, right?"

We'd exchanged a few usual remarks for half a minute or so before I noticed Beserdo and the squatty man, Frenchy, had been on their feet, back from the fire a little way, their coffee cups left on the grass, ever since the newcomer had ridden up. He went off to unsaddle and water his horse, a stout-built chocolate animal with the kind of legs and haunches that ate miles. Beserdo and Frenchy squatted down again.

The four of us broke out dry grub from our rolls and poured more coffee. But Johnny Tanner didn't eat much. Instead, he opened a quart bottle of whiskey. He had half a tin cup of black coffee. He filled it the rest of the way with rye that must have smelled clear to the quarter moon overhead.

"Makes a damn good drink," he suggested, extending the bottle in a careless gesture.

Beserdo didn't hesitate. His reddish-black eyes glinted with a greedy relish. He sloshed a good half of his coffee aside and held this cup toward the bottle. Johnny poured.

Dug and Frenchy extended their cup hands, and then I took my turn. The air gets cold quick there in the Stretch when night comes on. The stuff was as warming as a sheepskin. The round took the bottle nearly half-way down.

"HELL, yes, I killed him!"

Johnny mouthed it again, boasting with his tongue a little thick. He started all over. I tried to shut my ears to him and my head buzzed and his bragging words smashed in anyhow.

"I'm south of the river now and don't care who knows it! Man, that was something!" He twisted agitatedly against the

saddle under his shoulder and looked around at us.

"There he was coming down the street, half of Parsons scared just to hear him walk! And there I was in the alley, dark as the inside of a black cat and looking at a target a blind man couldn't miss. 'All right, Mister Law-And-Order,' I said. 'Let's see you quick-draw out of this one!'

"Then he was in the light from the street. See this Colt caboose?" He slapped the gun holster which had twisted around to his belly and looked at each of us with a challenging laugh. "Man, I took off the brakes and let 'er bump. *Ka-pow! Ka-pow! Ka-pow!* Three times, see? So quick the third 'un beat the first 'un! Three was enough and I ain't nobody's fool. Nossir—I saved three back for Tolbert's shadow." He leered around proudly.

"His shadow?" Beserdo prompted hoarsely.

"Yeah. That tough assistant of his, just in case he might be trailing along behind. I'd just as soon plugged him too. But I heard later he was out of town somewhere when it happened."

"You made your getaway without much trouble, I reckon," I said.

"Not a soul to trail me," Johnny chortled. "So that was the last of Mister Tinstar Tolbert. He sure gun-clubbed the wrong man that night! I'm the guy that did what everybody said couldn't be done —and Parsons all of a sudden didn't have a town marshal any more! You've been there, Thomason, you say—and you other gents. You knew the marshal's reputation. Thought maybe you might like to know the man that everybody's still talking about and don't know who he is! Now you can say you met the man that bested Marshal Tolbert. It's *me*! Gimme that bottle, Thomason."

The bottle was empty now, except for a few thin drops, but I held it out to him, not wanting to look at the braggart. Maybe I was a little drunk, too. Maybe we'd all washed down that quart too fast in the black, bitter coffee. Anyhow, I felt sick. An hour of that smart-Alec, drunken boasting was about all a man could take.

It had started out with casual trail gossip. Beserdo had mentioned Parsons. Then the subject naturally came to the killing of Marshal Tolbert. Everybody was still talking about it, all over the country, wondering who had pulled the ambush.

If the meanest man on earth, with the devil siding him in person, had jumped Tolbert, they say old Tolbert would have just bunched those bushy gray eyebrows and waded right in to mix it, fist or gun. No doubt about it, he was a fearless man and he was respected for holding the lid on Parsons at a mighty wild time—except in circles that had reason to hate him.

He had quieted down that big drunken

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free-for-all that night in the Longhorn Dance Hall when a bunch of wild drunks had ganged up to strip one of the joint's dancing girls before a whiskey-batty mob. He had clubbed a few onery skulls of the worst ones in the melee. But he'd got it under control without having to fire a shot, and the poor, scared gal had escaped with still a patch or two of clothes on 'er to half-way save her respect at vital points.

And that was the night he was ambushed from the alley.

Maybe the man who could shoot down Marshal Tolbert was entitled, in a way, to go off an brag about it, once he was out of Kansas. Maybe I should have felt distinction, just knowing him, drinking from the same bottle with such a talked-about gun whiz. In some circles, I guess, he'd be big stuff.

But just hearing this man, as he got drunk and talked louder and finally bragged out his story—it made my insides squirm. First he'd been a pleasant-looking stranger, still young, with a clean smile. Then you could tell the whiskey was hitting him. That he wanted to show off. That he had something all-fired proud on his chest he wanted to tell somebody about.

For what was the good, to a killer, of pulling that ambush, if he wasn't to escape and be able to tell about it? Big brag talk? It wasn't pleasant, seeing the change in him. It was damn disgusting. It was like a smart, friendly dog had drifted into camp and then slowly turned into a stinking polecat or lobo wolf, right before your eyes.

I LIGHTED another smoke and leaned back in the shadows and put my eyes on the man who had managed to do what a lot of bad 'uns would liked to have done if they'd had the guts—trap the famous marshal of Parsons. Beserdo was sitting hunched up, his thick hands playing with his empty cup, and Dug was looking hard at Johnny, and Frenchy was just staring at the fire with his mouth tight. Johnny was reared back, trying to trickle the last few drops out of the bottle into his gullet and, I reckon, waiting for us to be duly impressed by his identity.

"That assistant marshal," I suggested, maybe a little sourly. "I guess you moved right quick, feller, to keep him from being right on your tail!"

"He's a blank wad!" Johnny laughed sarcastically and sat up. "Why you know what they said about him—that he was just riding Tolbert's reputation, had no guts, love-sick over Tolbert's good-looking daughter! And that he couldn't arrest a hog-tied calf! Not unless Tolbert was right along to back him! Hell, no. Wasn't a thing for me to worry about there!"

Johnny sailed the bottle into a clump of bushes and laughed again in disgust.

"All the same," I couldn't help retorting, "you might of been pretty lucky the bird wasn't around that night."

Johnny shrugged. "They say *he* was the lucky one."

I hadn't been looking at Beserdo. Suddenly a hyena-like howl ripped the air and I jumped ten inches off the ground. It came from Beserdo. I jerked around toward him and the man seemed all at once doubled up with the ravin' epilepsy. He was bent double, and his high-pitched howl turned into a hoarse rumble like a stampede was going on inside his chest. He was holding himself with both arms around his thick middle. It took a few seconds for my hair to quit bristling and for it to sink in.

Beserdo was laughing. He was having a fit of crazy, drunken laughter. He was bellering like a bull, twisting as if he couldn't stand it any longer. He started pounding the ground, letting out whooping roars. I never saw a man so crazy-drunk tickled in my life.

Dug was grinning behind his whisker

mat. Then he started laughing, too. Only Frenchy sat still, frowning.

"He killed Tolbert!" Beserdo yelled. Another fit of laughter shook him all over and tears trickled down into his brush. He pointed a thick finger derisively at the open-mouthed Johnny. "Haw-haw-haw! *He* killed the marshal of Parsons!"

"Haw-haw-haw!" Dug whooped out. He and Beserdo went into new spasms and slapped the ground with their flat hands.

"Shut up yore mouths!" Frenchy snarled. But they paid no attention.

I wondered if I was having a drunk nightmare. Johnny was sitting up straight, a funny look on his face.

The laughter died suddenly out of Beserdo. All at once he turned angry. He went just as mad as he'd been tickled a moment before. He squared around and struggled to his knees, then groggily got up on his feet.

"Why yuh two-bit, lyin' bag o' wind!" He towered over Johnny. His big hands worked like he wanted to get 'em on Johnny's throat. "Yuh lyin', windy, fakin' four-flusher, yuh! *Yuh* killed Tolbert! Yuh—"

"Of all the places to spill that big windy!" Dug whooped out, still laughing like it was the funniest thing he'd heard in his life. "Of *all* the places—right here before me'n Beserdo'n Frenchy!"

"Yuh want to be a show-off!" Beserdo raged. "Thought yuh'd come ridin' in an' impress somebody with yore big talk! Yuh damn shore picked the wrong place to tell yore windy, yuh smart son!"

"What about it?" I demanded, finally getting my tongue to work. "You mean he ain't actually the one—that he's just giving us a snipe-hunt flow of jabber?"

Johnny's head was hanging.

"Damn shore was!" Beserdo stormed. "Big windy lie from start to finish! He just got kotched in the wrong place, that's all!"

"How do you know?" I protested. "How do you know it's a lie?"

Beserdo looked down at us and a great intake of air swelled his chest and his eyes burned triumphantly.

"Because, feller, it so happens that us three right here—me an' Dug an' Frenchy *—we're the ones that killed Tolbert!*"

"Mighty damn right!" Dug importantly stood up, too. "We done it. We was in that dance hall brawl an' Tolbert roughed us, an' we'd had trouble with him before, anyhow, over a load of cowhides we stole. So we laid for him in that alley an' we took a shot apiece, all three of us, then we vamoosed outta there, an' here this windy comes along an' tries to make a big impression on somebody, figurin' we was strangers that'd never know the difference. Funniest damn thing I ever heard of! Thought I'd bust while he was makin' up that brag—he fell in, hook, line an' sinker. Haw-haw-haw!" Dug still thought it was a big joke.

BUT Beserdo was drunk-mad about it now. Suddenly he kicked out a boot and if Johnny hadn't jerked his head sideways mighty quick Beserdo's toe would have smacked him in the temple. Johnny fell back on his hands and glared up at the big man.

"Next time don't try to be so all-fired smart!" Beserdo snarled down at him.

"You can't prove it wasn't me!" Johnny said weakly.

Beserdo leaned over and jerked off his own hat, appealing to me more than Johnny. "See that?" He tapped a spot on his skull. "See that bump? Well, that's where Tolbert clubbed me with his gun that night. Did the same to Dug and Frenchy. Show 'em, boys!"

Dug willingly complied. Frenchy looked glumly at the fire.

"An' if you want more proof," Beserdo's voice dropped to a dramatic gutteral, "here's the marshal's own gun I

grabbed off'n him when he fell in the alley." He jerked a hand from under his coat and a rugged old .45 appeared. "See them initials cut in the wood stock? Everybody knows this here's Tolbert's gun!"

Johnny squirmed back aways. "I reckon that's proof enough," he said sheepishly. "Didn't know I'd run into you down here. I was just—"

"Yuh was just a mouthin' damn drunk liar, tryin' to pull a big windy!" Beserdo snarled.

"You talk too much, Beserdo," Frenchy spoke without looking around.

"Shut up!" Beserdo retorted. Frenchy's words seemed to make him wilder.

Johnny squirmed back another inch or two. I felt sort of sorry for him, getting caught red-handed in his big yarn. But somehow, I was relieved, too. I was glad he hadn't killed Tolbert. I'd heard guys sit around a camp fire before, making up windies, trying to impress strangers. It wasn't such a sin. Lot better than actually ambushing a man.

"Thomason," Johnny said then, turning to me, "go down to the creek and get me a cup of water, will you? I feel sick."

I started to retort and say go get your own dang water. But Johnny was staring straight at me and something was compelling in his eyes. I don't know why I did it, but I got up and carried a cup and went down the slope in the darkness to get Johnny a cup of water.

I was stooping over a water hole when the shooting broke out. Somebody yelled, first, back at the camp fire, then a gun roared, then another, and all hell was loose. I tried to run up the slope and slipped, and I was working to get my gun out. I fell over rocks and into holes, and the shooting had stopped when I worked to the top of the ridge.

"Get your hands high up, Thomason!" The voice was right behind me. It was Johnny's voice, and he had circled around in the darkness I held my hands high and walked out to the edge of the fire light.

I nearly stepped on Beserdo. He was spread out with his face in the dirt, a gun in his hand, one boot toe poked into the coals and beginning to scorch. Then I saw Dug. He wasn't moving either. He was half-way sprawled across Frenchy, and they had bloody faces and their guns were on the ground.

A hand reached up behind me and took my gun out of my fingers.

I TURNED around. Johnny was holding a .45 on me and his face was white where the fire light played on it and his hat was missing. I saw a dark, moist spot in his sleeve, close to the shoulder.

"Put your hands down, Thomason," Johnny said.

I stepped back from Beserdo. "You—you killed all three of 'em!" I mumbled. My tongue was dry. Was he going to give it to me next? I bent down and pulled Beserdo's big leg a dead weight, back from the fire.

"Thomason," said Johnny, "listen. You don't see any bodies here. Not of men. You went down to the creek, Thomason. And when you came back there's just three dead rattlesnakes. They just crawled into camp. Nobody here but you and me. So naturally I shot 'em. Think of it like that, feller. It ain't so much. Just three rattlers."

Johnny handed me back my Colt. He looked at me hard as I took it, then he shoved his own gun into his holster. He picked the gun out of Beserdo's hand.

"I'll take Tolbert's back to his daughter," he said. He didn't seem drunk any more. His smile was on again, but it was taut and there was no humor in it. He looked at the rattlesnakes a minute, and I looked too.

"Tolbert's daughter?" I said.

He nodded, "I can't bring *him* back,"

he said quietly. "Maybe I could have, if I'd been there that night. I kept telling him some low scum like this would waylay him." Johnny ripped out long, bitter oaths, then. When he calmed, in a minute, he said wearily, "Thomason, plug my arm with something, will you?"

I started to work on his arm.

"You're Johnny Tanner, ain't you? Tolbert's assistant?" Without waiting for him to answer, I added, "Johnny, you're the damn best actor I ever saw."

"I ought to be," he grinned. "I been pulling that stunt on strangers on the trail damn near every night for two weeks or more. Figured they'd head this way, that maybe finally I'd run into them. The job was to know 'em when I found 'em. Birds like that, though, can't stand for somebody to sit up and bald-face steal their glory. Specially not if you prime 'em with whiskey first."

"How'd you manage to keep it up?" I demanded. "Getting drunk every night, I mean?"

"There's a hole in the bottom of my tin cup," he said patiently. "I just kept my finger over it when it was in sight, let the stuff soak out and down into the grass."

"You sent me for water," I suddenly recalled. "You wanted me out of the way when you started, didn't you, Tanner?"

Johnny leaned back on his saddle and groaned a little when I bandaged the place where Beserdo's first and only shot nicked him.

"I knew when I started they'd all be shooting at once," Johnny said wearily. "I had to tell 'em who I was, first. No reason for you to get hurt. Besides, I didn't know but what you'd get excited and start shooting at me."

I looked down at Beserdo and Dug and Frenchy. All I saw was three loosely coiled rattlesnakes, their fangs pulled now, their rattles still and silent for good. Then I looked at the young assistant marshal of Parsons. I thought I saw bunched up bushy gray eyebrows of an old man who would wade in and mix it, gun or fist, with anything or anybody.

Johnny looked up and his smile was clean as a prairie morning, only it separated into a dozen of them, and I lay back in the grass a minute. There hadn't been any hole in my cup.

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MAGAZINE

He swung himself up, and a massive forepaw grazed his foot.

PHANTOM GRIZZLY

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

"PUSIK!" The trapper's voice was scarcely audible as he gasped out the name. He squeezed his eyes tightly, then quickly opened them to glare again at the lumbering silvertip in the draw below. Now and then, as he shambled along, the big grizzly stumbled.

Surely something was wrong. Naska, the Indian, had had some education at the Indian Mission. He had been taught by the white people that it was not good to believe in the old superstitions. Now he made clucking sounds with his tongue. His grandfather, old Nisto, had told spine-tangling tales of Pusik, the king silvertip.

Naska shuddered. Back in his small shack lay the big cured hide of old Pusik—a rug to warm the feet of Naska and his wife.

But here before Naska's eyes was Pusik in the flesh. There could be no other so sharply silvered, walking along with that broken gait Nisto had talked about.

Naska raised his rifle and lined his sights, but he shuddered and was forced again to squeeze his eyes tightly closed. When he opened them sharply, the big creatures had vanished.

"Ahah!" Naska gasped. So it was the great ghost of Pusik after all! Pusik's spirit had come back to haunt the grandson of the man who had slain him.

FOR long moments, Naska stood staring into the draw. Upturned roots and old anthills loomed like moving forms in a mist. The man passed his tongue over his parched lips and uttered low guttural sounds.

Had that silvertip form been a material, physical thing, it should have been destroyed, for it would become a menace—a threat to the safety of Naska, his wife, and their dogs, as well as a potential marauder of the catch along the traplines.

Brush cracked at Naska's back. He whirled, quivering. His eyes batted sharply as he glimpsed the blurred form of a young bull moose, but Naska's rifle was down across his thighs. He had come out hunting deer or moose and here within easy range now stood a handsome bull moose.

How can you fight a ghost grizzly that has come back after forty years—when your bullets pass through his hide and the cleverest baited trap snaps its steel jaws on thin air?

The bull was gliding through a thicket. But by the time Naska had collected his wits, the moose was gone and dusk was swiftly spreading its dark gray mantle down on the eerie wilderness country.

Naska quivered. The ghost of Pusik had surely begun to cast its evil spell.

Naska had promised his young wife Aleta that he would bring home fresh liver. They were running short of meat—meat for themselves and for the dogs.

As he neared the home area two of his sled dogs came loping to meet him. He kicked out at them, sending one sprawling, then instantly was sorry. Seldom did he abuse his sled dogs. Never did he use the whip, save when the dogs engaged in a free-for-all.

At the small stoop of the log cabin he paused, to gaze back toward the north-

west in the direction of the gully down which he had watched the ghost of Pusik.

He pulled the latch. A lovely young halfbreed woman glanced sharply up.

"No food again, brave one?" she asked.

Naska winced. He drew the back of a hand across his eyes. She had worked hard, had helped him dress his fur catch, and had often helped along the trapline.

He forced a smile.

"Ayah! I wish I could tell you what happened. I let a big bull moose steal right away. It was as if my hands were tied, as if I looked through a mist. Don't ask why. Tomorrow I shall get a moose or a big buck. Plenty of meat for us all." He broke off. His wife's eyes were wide, staring. Her forehead was ridged and furrowed.

With a light shrug she turned to her small cookstove to stir a stew into which she had put the last of their meat.

Tomorrow, Naska *must* bring food. Aleta wanted her baby to be a strong one.

As she served the evening meal, Aleta started every now and then. The dogs were acting strangely tonight. She could hear one of them snarl every so often and wail like a timber wolf.

Naska ate in silence. Now and then he trained a glance at the sprawled old grizzly hide on the floor by the bed—the hide of old Pusik—Aleta slyly watched her husband.

NIGHT closed down on the wilds—breathing sharp frosty air on the skeleton tamaracs cracking and snapping under the assault. Had Naska been awake he could have imagined those tamaracs cracking their skeleton joints—their gaunt fire-killed limbs outstretched as if gleefully welcoming this early frost, a prelude to grim winter.

It was Aleta who awakened suddenly at a cacophony of snarls and growls. She nudged Naska sharply. He sat up, blinking his eyes.

"You called me, little one? Surely the time has not come when I—ayah!" He moved swiftly. He had heard.

"The dogs, Naska," Aleta said. "You did not feed them. They fight!"

Naska was now wide awake, pouring himself into clothing. He reached up for his trail whip.

As he opened the cabin door, the snarls had subsided. He was glad of this. Fighting dogs, especially when some were part wolf, could do great damage—not only physical damage but damage to the morale and harmony of Naska's team.

As he stepped over the sill, he was startled to feel a dog fall against his legs.

Naska gasped. He whirled and yelled to Aleta. "A light, quick!"

As Aleta lit the small lamp, Naska gathered the big dog into his arms and carried him indoors.

"Lat, Naska!" Aleta cried.

The badly mauled dog was Lat, the great lead dog, part wolf, which Naska had raised from whelphood.

Naska was down on his knees beside the dog. He jerked up his head.

"Look, Aleta—his head, his side. *Nom d' un chien!*" He broke into vituperative French.

Aleta clapped a hand to her bosom. Her face paled, but she went down on her knees beside her husband and the dog.

"Out you go, Naska," she said. "See what else has happened."

Naska got to his feet, stood a moment quivering, then, leaving his trail whip lying on the floor, he hurled himself out of doors.

As he strode toward the dog compound fence, another member of his team came whimpering toward him. This was Nal, the mother of many a good northern lead dog. She dragged herself up to grovel at his feet. As he glanced down, his heart beat savagely.

"Not the dogs—not even wolves—did this," he said hoarsely.

"Pusik—achak!" The spirit of Pusik!

NASKA'S voice rose to a wild shriek. It was the continued whimpering of the wounded dog at his feet that cut him short. Gently he crumpled one of old Nal's ears.

"I shall do something for you, little one," he said huskily. "But first, the others—Heek, Sak and Osam. Where are they?"

He turned and whistled shrilly. Again and again he called. Now his heart beat sharply as two of his team members came slinking toward him from the nearby thicket.

"Sak—and—Osam!" he said. "What of Heek, the big black one?"

Naska's mouth quivered. Heek, he felt sure, would never return. He had been carried off by the evil one—that Satan grizzly.

Placing the two unhurt dogs in their compound, Naska carried Nal to the cabin. Aleta had already begun to bathe the wounds of the big lead dog. Through eyes dulled with grief, she gazed at her husband, her eyes questioning.

"It is—the evil one, Aleta," he said softly. "You can't believe me, but—I saw him before full dusk up at the tamarac draw. Pusik, that my grandfather killed. He—"

Naska broke off to glare at the big hide on the floor by the bed.

"Pusik—Naska?" Aleta said brokenly. A soft, half-hysterical chuckle escaped her. Naska swung sharply, his hand raised as if to strike her for her mockery. Slowly he relaxed.

"Tomorrow, I shall find him," he said. "I shall pick up the ghost trail from the blood sign of Heek. But now we must get fine *babiche* and sew up the wounds of Lat and old Nal. *Tonnerre d' bleu,* Aleta! But this is bad for you. You go now to bed and I shall do what has to be done."

Aleta got to her feet. She moved to the stove. Slipping on a parka, she picked up the stew pot.

"The two dogs outside must have this, Naska," she said. "For Lat and Nal, we shall open the last can of milk."

Outside at the compound fence, Aleta uttered a sharp little cry as the two dogs bounded toward her. Even in the half light she could identify them both. *Heek* was here. It was Sak which was missing.

She gasped. Naska had made the great mistake.

Back at the house, Aleta waited until Naska had completed his surgery and had carried the wounded dogs to the little storehouse annex. He whirled, leaping back to catch Aleta as she reeled dizzily.

Gently he placed her on the bed.

"Rest now, little one," he said softly. "I make tea—strong black tea."

Later, as he watched his wife sip her

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tea, he felt better. He felt better in the sudden sharp realization that no ghost creature could wreak such havoc as had been caused this night.

"Tomorrow," he breathed silently. "Tomorrow I shall take up the trail of the big one."

THE following morning, well before the sun rose to bejewel the frost-draped wilds, Naska was out along the faint blood trail. He halted at a small clearing ringed by wild rose scrub and aspens. Here was grim sign—where the 'ghost' grizzly had stopped to feat on his prey.

"Heek!" Naska gasped out the name of his dog. But now he stooped and picked up a patch of dog hair. A low throat sound escaped him, as he held the hair close to his eyes. It was the hair of Sak, the youngest member of his team.

The more Naska pondered his great mistake in identification of the dogs at the compound last night, the more violently he shuddered. The old legends of Nisto, his grandfather, surged through his mind. He thought of Aleta who had gone out to feed the two dogs last night. She had made no mention of his incorrect identification of the dogs.

Naska was fighting hard now, fighting against the urge to leave his mind wide open to the surge of old Indian superstitions. He was still so fighting when the sun rose, to flood the country with its dazzling light.

He was still poised, mind and heart torn between two separate strong beliefs, when he heard brush crack off left. He raised the hammer of his carbine and slowly turned.

His body tingled with exuberance as he glimpsed a set of handsome muledeer antlers showing over the top of a clump of low willows. They were the antlers of a four-year-old buck. Here was food that Aleta especially required.

Naska had always been a good hunter, seldom missing game until the past year when he suffered some eye shock from sun-blindness, a temporary affliction, but one which had worried Aleta a great deal.

He raised his ribe slowly, took deliberate aim. He was steady. He could not miss.

As he squeezed his trigger there was a sharp metallic click. The buck reared to go bounding off in high preliminary jumps before settling into his run.

Naska shook violently. He swore in his native Cree tongue, in broken English, and then in the more expressive French language. He settled back, his eyes wide.

"It is the spell of the—evil one!" he wailed. He heard the thump-thump of the fleeing buck's hoofs, and as he listened he became more relaxed. A new courage and determination came to him in his desire to break the spell of this great ghost grizzly.

He cursed himself soundly for not having thrown a cartridge into the breech of his rifle. He must be more careful. He could not return to his patient wife without the liver of a deer or moose. Thoughts of the beautiful Aleta, more than any other factor, restored him.

He worked his carbine lever mechanism carefully and squinted in to the breech to make sure a cartridge was injected. He tested wind, and turned to intercept the big buck's flight.

A FLIGHT of snow geese gave out their gravelly honks high overhead as they winged on toward a south lake. Squirrels scampered, chirring, across Naska's path as he neared the jackpine ridges, but he paid these signs and actions no heed. When a whiskey-jack jay bird chattered from a tree nearby, he swore softly. These bird cries often warned game animals of the approach of danger.

Sure the wind was now in his favor, the man moved on, his moccasined feet gliding noiselessly over windfall rubble. He

could now smell deer, but suddenly he felt a slap of wind on his left cheek.

In a coulee between hogback ridges ahead, brush cracked. Naska froze, slowly turning his head to see a big doe break. A doe! He had fully expected to see a buck here.

The alarm was on. He heard a fresh sound and leaped forward to see a handsome big buck jump, breaking for the far ridge.

Naska steadied himself. He raised his rifle and sucked in a long breath, holding it. This would be easy shooting, for the buck, a big target, was no more than seventy yards distant, forced to ascend the sharp incline. Naska had more than once brought down a running buck at more than twice this range.

He laid the barrel of his rifle across the buck's head and forequarter. Now he eased the muzzle a half point to the right and squeezed the trigger. It was perfect sighting, he knew. He was sure he had heard the thump of the striking bullet, but again the spirit of Pusik, the evil one, seemed to have thwarted him. He levered another cartridge into the carbine's breech and jerked the muzzle forward. The fleeing buck pitched forward, dead.

A low quavering throat sound cloyed in Naska's throat. He stood, leaning forward, scarcely believing.

Then he was chuckling thickly as he dressed out the buck. There was too much venison to pack out at one time. He would take the liver and half the carcass; the other half he would cache in the fork of a tree. Aleta would be glad of the succulent liver.

The half carcass draped across his shoulders, he turned, to glance up at the fork of the leaning tree which held his cache.

"I will be back again today," he said. Then, chuckling, he broke into a little French folk song he had learnt up at the Mission school. Life was so good! On his next trip back, he would bring the two dogs with him, allowing them to eat their fill of the offal. Then, tomorrow, *tonnerre!* he would in earnest take up the trail of the ghost grizzly.

AFTER lunch, Naska snoozed. He was proud today, happy because of the revived light of affection in Aleta's eyes.

Aleta woke him when it was time for him to go back for the rest of the venison. He promised that one day he would bring in a yearling, whose hide would make the softest clothing for the little one.

Later, as he released the dogs, and watched Heek bound forward, Naska quivered. He feared for Aleta.

"Keep to the heels, *mes amis!*" he called, bringing the eager dogs back. "No rabbit trails for you. I do not trust that Satan grizzly."

As they neared the site of Naska's deer kill, Heek raised his hackles, snarling. Lips peeled back, he cringed. Naska moved in and roughed up one of the dog's ears.

"Quiet, my friend. Soon you will feed. Now what is it you smell? A carcajou, mebbeso? It would be well to see one."

Making sure there was a cartridge in his carbine's breech, Naska moved on ahead of the dogs. He turned to flick a glance at his cache tree, then suddenly he spluttered and broke forward. The tree fork cache was empty. The venison had gone.

"*Cre nom d' un chien!*" he sobbed. "Tarat!"

Tarat, the wolverine, the most savage and ruthless plunderer in all the wilds had been in. A grizzly cannot climb.

Drawing back the hammer of his Winchester, Naska lunged forward, but came to a sharp halt as he saw the stern of the big silvertip rolling through the gloom of a wild fruit thicket ahead.

Naska's mouth was agape as he saw most of the deer carcass in the grizzly's jaws.

He shuddered. The big one had van-

ished, and again Naska had passed up the opportunity to make a big kill. He cursed himself for his weakness. When Heek, the big black part-wolf, crept up, Naska aimed a kick at the creature's shoulder.

Suddenly the dogs broke forward, snarling. Naska lunged on toward the spot at which he'd dressed out the buck. The sudden fierce snarling of the dogs caused him to whirl. Brush crashed and then Naska's eyes widened as he glimpsed the squat form of a wounded wolverine. The devil of the traplines was attempting to drag itself deeper into the brush.

NASKA turned and leveled his carbine. He had the picture of what had happened at the cache clearly in mind. Tarat, the thief, had come in, dislodged the meat, only to be attacked by the silvertip.

Naska pulled. The carcajou was hit, but he whirled, snarling, spitting, showing fight until at last he slumped in death.

The pelt of the wolverine was small compensation for the great loss of the venison, but the pelt would make excellent trim for the parkas of Aleta and the little one.

His two dogs were well filled for the time being. He called to them, headed them for home.

As he opened the shack door, Naska flung the pelt of Tarat down ear Aleta's feet. Her eyes were wide again, for she had watched him return without the meat.

"You did not bring in the rest of the buck, Naska?"

He swallowed sharply, then nodded down at the wolverine pelt.

"Can't you see, little one, the Satan bested me. He stole the meat from the cache and spoiled it, but there, is not that so wonderful a pelt for your parka trim? I never saw a finer pelt—so prime, and so well-striped. Like soft cream, Aleta."

Aleta bit her lip. Her eyes were dulled by a film of moisture as she picked up the pelt.

"It is so good," she said hesitantly. "You have done well to destroy Tarat, but *yakwa!*—take care!—The big grizzly is strong. He could easily kill you!"

She shook with mounting fear for her husband—fear for his safety, because of his eye condition. Ayah! She knew! She had suspected for some time, ever since his attack of snow-blindness the previous winter. She was sure now, for the pelt he praised so much was one of the poorest specimens Aleta had ever seen.

Smiling softly, Naska took the pelt from Aleta to take it outside and stretch it on the cabin wall. Indoors again he moved in to examine the large rug hide of old Pusik, the king grizzly. He dragged this to the little annex, and proceeded to smear it with bear grease from an old syrup can. As he worked, Aleta watched him closely.

As he glanced up at his life, Naska smiled.

"Tomorrow, at dawn, I dig the pit, Aleta. One day soon, the evil one will tang the scent of bear at the place of the deer kill. He will come in to attack. The pit, Aleta. Ayaie!" He broke off chuckling. Aleta clapped a hand to her full bosom, and leaned heavily against the door jamb.

When they returned to the main cabin, Naska found his wife gazing up at the picture of an old calendar. It was the picture of a grizzly bear attacking a ranger and his horse. The trapper batted his eyes. Ayah! He should have burned that picture long ago.

THE following morning, Naska was back at the kill site. He had brought up the well-greased hide of old Pusik. Removing his mackinaw coat, he seized the shovel he had brought and set to work digging.

"You will come back, big one," he grunted.

For two hours or more he worked at the pit. When he was satisfied it was deep enough, he covered it with light brush and

scattered slough grass all over the top.

Next, he dragged in an old fire-killed pine stump, setting it up at the easterly edge of the pit. Over the stump he draped the greased hide, then stood back to survey his handiwork. He figured the ghost bear was old, a creature whose sight was impaired. He would attack on impulse, guided by his keen scent which brought him the tang of another of his kind.

Naska had laid his plans well. He knew the fury of a grizzly which scented an intruder bear.

Naska had stared so long at his handiwork, he swore bitterly at the smarting sensation in his eyes. Soon, when the snows whipped down and the sun glared, he would have to wear his snow goggles. Grunting with satisfaction, he got into his coat, picked up his carbine, and headed for home.

On the way he started a muledeer doe, but grinned as he let her get away. Only in a case of emergency would he kill a doe—at this time of the year especially.

After supper, when the tamaracs began their bone cracking, Naska was startled by the snarling of his two dogs outside. He glanced sharply at Aleta, who was busy cleaning the mechanism of her own rifle.

"What, little one? Are you planning a hunt?" he asked softly. Aleta smiled.

"I have not cleaned the Savage in some time, Naska. It would be well to have it ready. One day when you are away on the trapline, I may have to signal to Pierre who will send his boy for Mathilde."

But of course. Naska had forgotten his arrangement with Pierre.

He reached for his own rifle. It would be well to be sure of its condition at the pit trap. The big ghost grizzly would not be too hungry yet, but Naska was sure that once the big one tanged the scent of alien bear, he would go charging to attack.

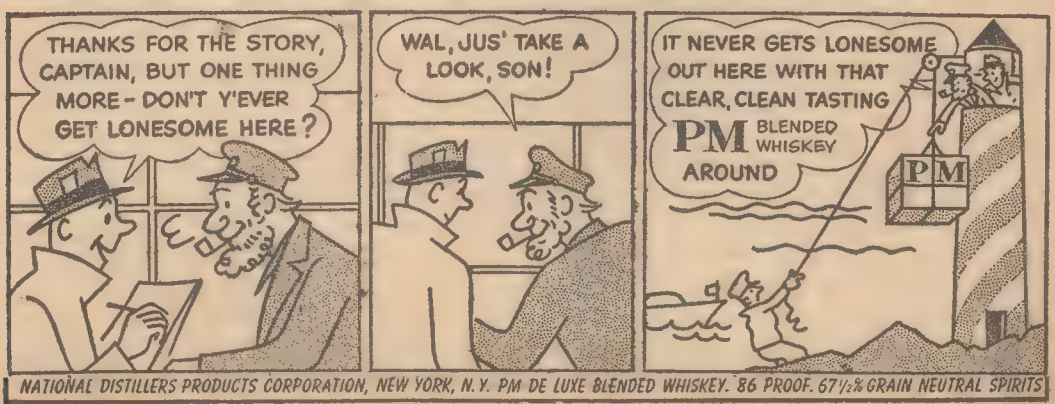
Later, as he took part of the remainder of the food to his dogs, he spoke softly to them.

"You are dusturb', *mes amis.* Perhaps a timber wolf is close—non?"

THE following morning Naska shivered as he headed up along the trail to the old draw zone. The frost had been sharper last night. It was thickly draped on all foliage and grass.

As he neared the site of the kill, his heart began to thump violently, then suddenly he became electrified by sounds, the guttural snarls of a silvertip.

Ghosts do not roar, or bellow. He was sure, but—Ayaie! Naska quivered with misgiving. He now gasped aloud as he glared at the pit trap. There was movement there. He squeezed his eyes tightly. There, at the trap! The brush covering was crashed in. Naska took a sharp step forward, seeing the huge form in the pit.


THANKS FOR THE STORY, CAPTAIN, BUT ONE THING MORE - DON'T Y'EVER GET LONESOME HERE?
WAL, JUS' TAKE A LOOK, SON!
IT NEVER GETS LONESOME OUT HERE WITH THAT CLEAR, CLEAN TASTING PM BLENDED WHISKEY AROUND
PM
NATIONAL DISTILLERS PRODUCTS CORPORATION, NEW YORK, N.Y. PM DE LUXE BLENDED WHISKEY. 86 PROOF. 67½% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS

But suddenly his mouth became parched. He froze. Off left he heard a deep-throated snarl. He whirled to see the great form of the silvertip. Now the huge creature half wheeled, was dropping.

Naska could not possibly take time out to shoot. His eyes smarted. He saw the haven of jackpines ahead through blurred vision.

At the first pine he dropped his rifle and leaped up to clutch a low, overhanging limb. As he swung himself up, a massive forepaw struck, almost grazing one of the man's moccasined feet.

A leg whipped about the pine limb, Naska pulled himself into the first fork of the tree, as the big bear smashed at the bole.

His legs and arms gripping his haven tightly, Naska shuddered. He glanced down and through the moisture film he saw the great tusks of the silvertip ripping out bark.

Naska thought of Aleta. Ayah! He should have made open confession of his eye condition.

He gasped. The tree seemed to be giving under the grizzly's continued assault. Naska almost swooned when he heard a sharp crack. His arms were frozen around the bole.

Then he was startled by a sharper crack. Another and another! The big creature bellowed. Naska ventured a glance down. The ghost grizzly was on the ground, sprawled, but lashing, biting, snarling.

And then, when another sharper crack sounded, Naska almost lost his hold on the tree fork. Those cracks had been shots.

"A—leta," he gasped. He turned to see his wife standing, the smoking Savage in her hands.

ON the ground, still quivering in every nerve fibre, Naska trembled as he started to talk.

"So, little one, you knew all the time? That was why you were cleaning your rifle last night. Ayaie! I was the foolish one to believe I could hide it from you—the eye trouble. I must get to the outside, before I start trapping, and see the doctor. Get the glasses."

"Yes, Naska. You should have done that after the snow blindness." She clapped the back of a hand to her forehead and would have fallen had not Naska recovered his wits and caught her.

Shortly, Aleta, fully recovered from the shack, watched Naska down on his knees, skinning out the big grizzly. He glanced up, smiling at his brave wife.

"When I get the glasses, little one, no more will I be seeing the ghosts. But look! The size of this one, and the thickness of the hair. He will make the finest rug for you and the little Nisto."

Aleta nodded, forcing a smile. But her eyes were still wide, dulled by the aftermath of her great fear and shock. Then suddenly her mood changed. Her eyes flashed and her tongue flicked as she opened up a verbal barrage on her husband Naska.

"Tomorrow you go to the Outside!" she called. "And then, let me hear no more about your ghosts, or evil spirits! Forget the old tales of Nisto, your grandfather. And hurry back, for you must kill a moose!"

Naska showed no signs of resentment at her tongue-lashing. In fact, he was glad of it, for he knew that Aleta had recovered from her shock.

He would hurry back and then—He glanced long toward the easterly tamarac and willow swales where shortly the moose would be yarding. His mouth was slit in a hard thin line. Grunting, he returned to his skinning out, and his lips moved, framing the words of an old folk song. The gods had been good to give him the so brave Aleta!

Strike at The Ophir!

Old-timers smelled a rat when the silver in the Ophir Lode mined so pure it didn't even need to be smelted!

By HAROLD GLUCK

IT SOUNDS dramatic to state that the story of many a Western mine could be told in terms of the bleached bones of the prospectors who sought the precious metals. However, for the sake of accuracy, it would be better to say that the empty wallets of defrauded investors left a better trail. The confidence man was known out West as well as back East.

Records show that many mines were "salted" during the years from 1863 to 1864. In those days thousands of people parted with their hard-earned cash for shares in salted claims boomed high on the strength of high assays. There was a claim called the North Ophir. It was north of the Ophir which was a well-known mine on the Comstock Lode.

To be accurate, the North Ophir was a long way north, a fact which in itself was suspicious. As a mine, it wasn't worth three cents a mile. Then the con men got together and decided to have it give birth to silver. One dark night, one of them, Honest Face Harlowe, stole into the North Ophir shaft. He poured melted silver and silver filings liberally into the seams and cracks of the ledge. He picked up rocks and rubbed silver all over them.

A few days afterwards a party of experts were invited to visit the mine. They went to it, entered the shaft and examined the ledge, which was in reality as barren as a mule. They carried bags with them and took back samples of rock for assay. The assays panned out big.

The experts were only human. They gathered up all available cash and bought stock. They let their best friends in on the deal. Everyone soon started to bid for shares of North Ophir. In a few hours the stock went from three dollars a share to thirty dollars. By word of mouth went the advice, "Get in on North Ophir. There's going to be a boom like the West has never seen. Watch and see, the shares will be worth a thousand dollars soon."

But then a most unusual thing happened.

An expert named Harry "The Fox" Jorgensen was a bit cautious. He wanted to do a little more rechecking before investing his hard-earned money. In his bag he still had some samples taken from the mine. Very minutely Jorgensen examined a piece of ore and then discovered something most unusual.

Behold, there, impressed on the rock, was the tip of the wing of the American eagle, as represented on the American half-dollar. How was such a miracle possible? Jorgensen figured there could be only one answer. The mine had been "salted." Running out of silver bullion, Honest Face Harlowe had taken silver half-dollars. Harlowe had placed this particular half-dollar on the rock, and then proceeded to flatten it out with a hammer.

Jorgensen did not keep the news to himself. The next morning while the shares were still selling at thirty dollars each, he informed his friends that they had been taken in by the promoters. That night you could purchase stock in the North Ophir at two dollars a cord. Not all scalping in the West was done by the Indians. Lots of it was accomplished by con men of one sort or another.

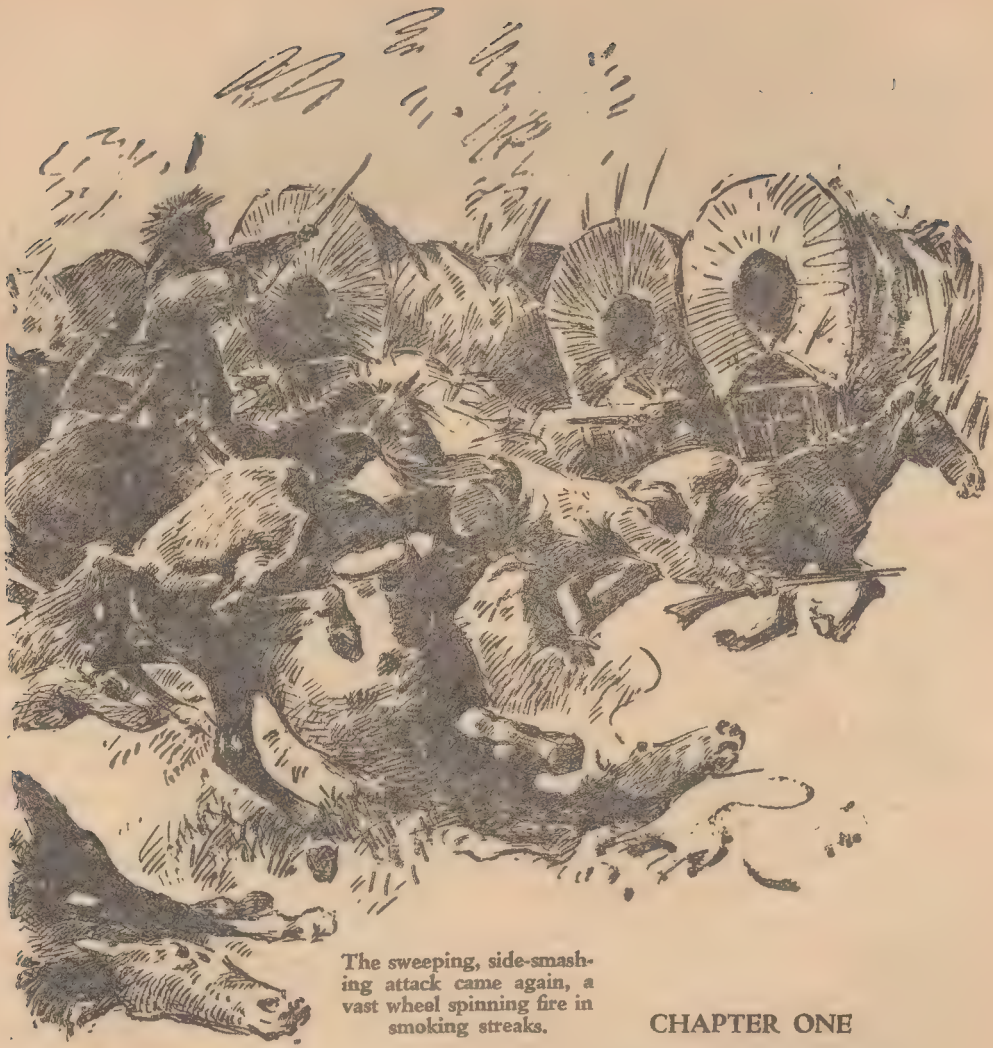
By TOM ROAN

Man-Sized

Wagon-Train

Novel

The Buckskin Devil —Gun-Guardian!



The sweeping, side-smashing attack came again, a vast wheel spinning fire in smoking streaks.

CHAPTER ONE

Montana Is a Fighting Word!

When the glory-crazy pilgrim caravan hired on Duke Paulson for its wagon captain, it signed its own death-warrant. . . . Nothing could burn that document of the damned but the flaming arrows of the Cheyennes, who waited with cunning, deadly patience in the rocky crags of Squaw Crest.

THERE WOULD BE trouble before another thirty-six hours, the kind that always brought blood, the screaming of women, the wailing of children, and the yells of dying men. Into all that would come the pound of pony hoofs, ring after ring of furious riders closing in, feathers spinning in the wind, rifles blazing, and there would be the wolf-howling of the reds, the swish and flutter of burning arrows. And there would be the crackling of flames from the canvas tops of the covered wagons.

Here, below the crest of the great ridge,

the ground sloped gently, the buffalo grass a green carpet all the way to the cottonwoods along the river. Beyond that, swells of higher ground rolled up, one ridge on top of another until they came to the drop-off of a deeper valley. Beyond that, ringed by silvery evening clouds, stood Squaw Crest, tall, lonely and still, tipped with snow, the lower slopes rimmed in green up to the bald gray timberline. Somewhere between this point and that peak the Indians would lurk—Cheyenne, Tongue, Crow and the ever-dreaded Little Snakes.

As Yazoo Sam Flint, a long-haired man nearing seventy, sat tilted forward in the saddle of a tall bay, a rangy lean figure in battered buckskins, a week's growth of beard on his weather-beaten face, he stole a glance at his young companion.

Apache Frank Dalton sat straight in his saddle, pale eyes calm as always, the brand of the far Southwest written all over him. A life of constant hardship was already telling on him, even though he was barely thirty. Patches of gray were at the temples of the curling, light-brown hair. Like his companion he was long and lean, garbed in yellow buckskins elaborate with Indian beadwork and fringe. The rifle across his lap, the six-shooters at his hips and the long-bladed knife hanging in a sheath down his bosom were as much a part of him as the nose on his face.

Both turned in their saddles and looked behind them, their brows knitting. Their thoughts were the same as they studied the south slope. A long wagon train was beginning to mount the foot of the ridge, its oxen reeling shapes of bone and skin, its mules and horses creaking the yokes and straining their ragged harnesses. The swaying, patched and repatched canvas tops of the wagons washed along in the red light of the lowering sun.

That was Duke Paulson's once-fine wagon train down there—hell-damned all the way from the start at Council Bluffs early in the spring. Smallpox had struck it down north of the Platte. Reds and horsethieves had struck it on the Niobrara, and twice again just south of the Black Hills, almost cutting it to pieces each time.

Heading a twenty-wagon freighter wagon north, Apache Frank Dalton and old Yazoo Sam Flint had fallen in with it only a week ago on the Powder just above the Salt.

"An' hell's been a-hoppin' the bushes ever since," growled Flint. "Duke Paulson ain't got nothin' above his shoulders but a big head—an' the little brains in it dead-set on a purty woman!"

TURNING, they looked at the deep valley ahead, staring thoughtfully at the river and the great lanes of cottonwoods. There was grass down there, wood and water—an excellent place to camp. A few days of rest for the stock would put meat back on their bones.

The freighter outfit was the only thing about the train that did not look ready to fall apart. It was back there behind the last of the settler wagons.

"An' all free an' damn little thanks!" Flint growled. "I'm gittin' like the Indians. I hate the sight of settlers—an' sometimes anything in the shape an' mouth-noise of a white man!"

Frank Dalton had been patient in spite of the constant bickering. Often there were sudden fights, and there had been bloodshed swinging through the train from the settlers themselves since their start for the West. Out of the hundred and twenty-odd wagons, to say nothing of the carts and the buggies and surreys of the better-to-do at the beginning, only seventy-seven wagons remained.

Dalton rode on, Flint beside him, neither wanting to watch the struggling on the slope, neither wanting to hear the cursing and yelling of the men, the cat-squalling of the women and the merciless

lashing and tight popping of the whips.

Three of Apache Dalton's scouts had already crossed the ridge and there somewhere beyond the river looking for Indian sign. The fact that there had been no signal was enough to say that the country was safe. Smoke signals rising from distant hills in the early afternoon had meant something else—Indians watching them from miles way and passing the information on to others in the hills beyond.

"Might be a bluff just to worry us," Flint speculated. "But them damn Cheyennes an' Sioux gangs ain't much for that. At times they don't mind it a bit when it comes to lettin' you know they're gettin' all set an' fixed to lift yore hair."

He had grown old watching things like this on the frontier. He had traveled all the trails—the Southern, the Santa Fe, the Spanish, the Mormon, the California and the Oregon. Fifty years of going had seen him in the Texas rush when Mexico opened the lands there to immigration in the 1820's.

Thousands of people had fled the tax-masters of a country gone tax-mad, hordes pouring down the Ohio, the Tennessee and the Mississippi on rafts, keel and flatboats to the mouth of the Red, then up it and overland into brush and prairie grass, into a land teeming with Mexican and gringo outlaws, rattlesnakes by the tens of millions, buffalo herds and warring Indians, wildcats in the cane-brakes and panthers in the ravines.

This Montana country was not much better. With buffalo hunters swarming in to wipe out the northern herds, settlers flooding the country with their long wagon trains, soldiers shooting down old bucks, women and children and the Indians on the war-path, it could not be much worse. Those in the real know of things were not too quick to blame the reds for the trouble they caused.

They saw them pushed back and back, the lands and hunting grounds robbed from under them, every promise made by the Great White Father turning to the blackest of lies. Now with the killing off of the buffalo, the palefaces were out to rob the redskin of meat for his belly, leaving him with nothing but the wind to live on.

IT WAS late August now. The people back there in the train would probably never live to see the breaking of spring. Winter would be letting down on them before they were settled, and winter meant howling winds and raging blizzards, the thermometer dropping down to fifty or sixty below.

Pneumonia would be rampant among them, starvation knocking on their doors —if they had any doors. Unless they stopped in some settlement there would

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not be a single house ahead for them. They would have to erect them, cutting logs for the walls, notching them, rolling them in place, splitting others to support their sod roofs, chinking the cracks with mud and grass to keep out the cold.

Montana could be good to people who knew how to handle themselves. Death rode a free rein for others. The Indians killed them, the hard winters and natural sickness took them off. It meant a fight for the strong and the wise, and everlasting oblivion for the weak and the stupid.

The horses were snorting, smelling the water in the distance and seeing all the rich grass, and they tried to break into a run down the slope. Dalton and Flint held them with tight reins, letting them swing into a gallop only when they came to the valley floor. They were sawing them down again when they came close to the river, two pairs of eyes studying the shadows under the cottonwoods.

Down another long but gentle slope, they came to the water's edge, letting the horses lower their heads as they splashed into the river. Both men relaxed, then suddenly stiffened in their saddles, faces hardening. For seconds they sat like that, then Dalton spoke from the side of his mouth, his voice a whisper.

"Stay here. It looks bad, Sam."

Spurring on across the shallow ford, Dalton pulled up just in the edge of the brush. A tall, gaunt bay stood there, hidden, head down, muzzle almost on the ground. At the horse's heels lay the figure of a short, heavy-set man in buckskins, scorched and blackened around a thousand campfires. Slowly, Dalton removed his big hat, Sam Flint still watching across the river.

The dead man was old Mississippi Dave Clark, one of his best scouts. He had the feathered shafts of seven arrows driven into him, one of them having slit his heart in half as it drove him through and through, killing him with the quickness of a flash of lightning.

CHAPTER TWO

Bloody Ground

GARBED in shining black except for a golden vest, a foot-tall brown beaver and a flashing white stock, Duke Paulson was like something out of a show window when he topped the ridge on a snorting black Kentucky charger. Tall, slender and black-haired, he rode a flat pigskin saddle. With his waxed mustache and his dark, hawkish face one might have mistaken him for the master of a three-ring circus.

The girl and her father were just behind him. Parson Matthew B. Honey was long and lean, close to sixty, a man in a dead-black suit, a wide black hat and riding a lusterless black horse. Grim now, his flat gray eyes looked down the slope. He nodded.

Grace Honey, turning twenty-one, was the apple of Matthew B. Honey's eye. Adventure was born with Grace Honey. It was in her blood, in her soul. Sometimes she startled her father. He was able to catch her alone once in a while to take her to task, trying to reason with her, fearing that she was about to leap the family fold entirely.

Only yesterday Grace Honey had appeared among the wagons astride a huge Mexican saddle on a wild-eyed outlaw bay that belonged to Frank Dalton—a shocking thing that had started every tongue in the train wagging. Regardless of what pagan redskin squaws and white women west of the Missouri might do, no real lady spread her legs astraddle a saddle. And above all, not on a horse belonging to a far-noted character like Apache Frank Dalton.

Apache Frank! The name had failed to lie well on Matthew B. Honey's stomach from the start.

Then there was Duke Paulson. All men came in for a careful going over where Grace was concerned. Duke Paulson was risk enough. He was flashy, dashy, vain. At the start Matt Honey had disliked him immensely. He was a man he had feared, but, gradually, he had come to a point of believing that he would understand him.

Duke Paulson was young and handsome. Young and handsome men these days were given to flashy, dashy things. His background was good. He was rich enough, a son of one of the richest tobacco planters in Kentucky, and he knew his manners around his elders. Such a man could easily be considered a "catch" for a pretty daughter.

Marriage and children would settle her down, make her know her place, her born duty in life, but—as with Grace—Matt Honey could not be sure that he wanted Duke Paulson in the family. Only one thing was deadly certain. He did not want such a man as Apache Frank Dalton shining around her. Such a character could sweep a girl off her feet.

"Water, grass, and timber for the evening campfires!" Paulson was in excellent spirits now, holding his prancing horse with a tight rein as he waved at the valley below. "Dalton, after all, I suppose," he was unable to hide a little frown and a slight curl to his lip, "does know a short cut here and there through this country."

"And should, probably," nodded the preacher. "Even a mule can be taught, finally, to pull a straight furrow across a field. It's his business, this fighting and crawling through mean and dangerous country, but the people of the train are still depending, and largely depending, on you and Captain Knight to get us through."

"Thank you, Reverend Honey." Paulson's smile was quick and broad. "I am sure everything from now on will only be a matter of time. Trouble is past."

"And let us pray," smiled the girl, "that 'Pache Frank, as his friends call him, is a little mistaken about the Indians ahead of us in the higher hills."

"He's wrong!" Paulson shifted his fine hat, tilting it over his right eye as he looked down the slope again. "But Dalton's kind are like that. After all, Miss Honey, they have so little to think about when bred and born out here in this wide and ignorant land. Some day, I suppose, Mr. Dalton will take himself a few squaws to wife and settle down somewhere off the beaten trails in a little trading post of his own. And," he added with a laugh, "as far as I know and from certain hints, he already has a squaw or two."

"Let's ride on!" Matt Honey was always quick to change the subject when the name of Dalton came up. "Captain Knight will handle the train without our having to think about it."

HORSES held with tight reins, they made it on down the slope at a slow gallop, Paulson bouncing on his little flat saddle. Just as they were coming to the slope right above the river Dalton appeared, his face longer and grimmer, something about his eyes always reminding a man of cold blue steel. Paulson spoke:

"Nice place for our camp, Dalton!"

"Maybe—and maybe not." Dalton was like a ramrod in his saddle. "I would suggest a light drink for all three horses, then Miss Honey can ride back up here. There's something just on the other side of the river that won't do her any particular good to see."

"What it it, Dalton?" There was impatience in Honey's tone.

"It's one of our scouts, parson." There was almost a hint of a cold little smile on Dalton's face now. "Mississippi Dave Clark. Indians must have been lying here

along the river when he came down the slope. Flint's over there with the body now."

"The body!" The girl's eyes had become big, round and golden. "You mean—he's dead? They killed him?"

"And his horse, too. That is, the horse was so nearly dead I had to finish him off."

Paulson's eyes had grown large, dark and almost glaring. "But we heard no shots, Dalton."

"I used this, Paulson." Dalton tapped the beaded buckskin sheath of his long knife, a tiny poison tube hanging beside it. "A quick thrust into the brain, and it was over. It was the only way." He was letting his horse turn back toward the water. "Let's hope it doesn't alarm the women and children too much. We can bury the body after supper."

"But we're not going to camp here, Dalton!" Matt Honey went white from the roots of his roaching iron-gray hair to his throat. "Not if death has struck a man down her—as good as in our very faces!"

"This is the only place for the next dozen miles." Dalton smiled again. "Don't let one mere killing bother you. The Indians probably made it just to let us know how good their scouts are. Let's hope that our other two are still alive. Hope is about all a man has to go on out here."

Waiting for no answer, he rode on to the water's edge.

CHAPTER THREE

Devil-Scout

HONEY preached the funeral after supper. Dalton and Flint had removed the arrows from the body. Every one of them was a Cheyenne. No one unless it was Honey himself could tell whether the soul of poor old Mississippi Dave Clark was being preached straight to the doors of Heaven or right on down into the sizzling and flaming pits of Hell.

The camp was quiet but tense. Sudden death always made a wagon train like that. But everything was under control. Dalton had carefully picked and set the guards, warning them that they would have to shift their positions before midnight so that Indians watching the train would not know where to find them.

People were listening to him now, though it seemed to hurt Duke Paulson, the parson, and the bull-necked Captain Amos Knight. The latter claimed to have been an officer of the Ohio militia at sometime in his past, but he was certainly not a plainsman.

The remaining two advance scouts had come in just after sundown. Rube Yardley was one of them, a red-bearded, red-headed giant in dirty gray buckskins. The other was dour-faced and black-bearded Link Hardy. Neither Yardley nor Hardy had known what had happened to Dave Clark.

"'Sippi wasn't feelin' so good of late," Yardley said. "A couple of teeth bothered 'im a heap, as yuh know, an' he was sorter unwary at the wrong second, I reckon. When we come down crost the valley we was a good mile apart. A few of them damn Cheyennes was lying' in wait over there, an' 'Sippi musta rid right into their trap. It's a story so old I reckon it's got more white whiskers on it than snow on Squaw Crest."

They rarely talked about such things. Sudden death was a foregone conclusion to a scout. Clark had been Link Hardy's bosom friend. They had been everywhere together, in hundreds of fights and brawls in the Indian country, but there was no malice for anyone.

"Just another one of them things, boys. Heap like playin' a right fast game of poker. 'Sippi maybe didn't know what hit 'im. Just maybe a stab of pain as them

Cheyenne arrows went through, an', then, there was nothin' else to worry 'em. We'll all get it in time, if we stay on in the business an' things don't change. We can't blame the damn Indian for fightin' for his own land."

Dalton knew as much about the Indian as most white men were allowed to know. The job here was to get that freight outfit through to Rattlesnake Flats on the Ruby River. Once the giant wagons were through, he would be at liberty to contract for another long haul through Indian country.

A killing, especially by Indians, usually alerted a wagon train from end to end, but even the best men on guard had to be watched and checked. Such men were worn out from a long hard day on the trail. They were placed in pairs in the darkest, quietest places, in pairs to make certain that at least one of the two could remain awake. But tired men lying flat on their stomachs could drop off to sleep without knowing it.

Catching sleep for himself for about three hours, Dalton was awake and stealing away. It was well after midnight now, and he moved like a ghost, down on his hands and knees in the tall grass. He was not worried about the stock guards. The cattle, horses and mules were up on the slopes grazing in the deep grass. The herd guard was up on the higher slopes, riding quietly back and forth. With that guard were three long-haired Texans, men who had seen death creep up on too many camps in the past to be caught.

THE danger was in the lower guard, down along the river in the shadows. Without knowing where some of the men were hiding, Dalton stole through the line, working his way eastward. Three hundred yards from the last two men he settled down in a low bowl of rocks.

Only a pale glow of light from the sky had let him see that slow-moving half-ring on the surface of the river. A deer, an antelope or some other quietly moving animal might have stolen across not far upstream, but as he waited and watched he saw more—a second, a third, and a fourth, each little disturbance so faint only a born scout could have noticed.

Ten minutes passed, twenty, then thirty, the surface of the river so still it might have never been disturbed; but not for a moment had his eyes been still, his head slow-turning, his ears cocked. Suddenly he was tensing, his muscles crawling, until it seemed that he had ceased breathing altogether.

There had been no sound, no sign of movement anywhere. Instinct might have warned him. He was conscious of his pulse quickening slightly. It was not fear; it was tension, the feeling of something closing in around him slowly and deliberately.

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He waited, gradually aware of a creeping figure flat on its belly in the bushes to his right. Another took shape in the rocks and brush upstream. By this time any man might have gone into action, but he remembered those four half-rings on the water. Then he saw another movement, three heads stealing upward from under the bank of the river, then the shoulders and the arms. By the faint glint on the water he saw feathers on the heads.

Five to one now, and it was time to let them have it. From a distance of little more than two yards to his right he let drive, the thunder of a roaring Colt filling the night, shattering the silence, bringing the startled chirp of a bird asleep in the trees. Then everything was gone, the licking flashes of flame tearing ribbons in the darkness, the Indian upstream dying, lead pouring into the faces, heads and shoulders of those coming over the riverbank.

Yells came from the circled wagon train. A woman screamed, children wailed. Except for that hellish noise the silence had come back, almost as quickly as it had been broken. Reloading his weapons, Dalton started moving back. When he was close to the first outpost he heard excited voices. He called out.

"Hold your fire, men. This is Dalton."

"Dalton! Gawd A'Mighty," sputtered a lanky Missourian, "I'm be damned 'f 'tain't! How'n hell did yuh git out there? What'n hell was the shootin' about? Yo've just erbout upset the whole camp from the sounds of it!"

"And fine guards you two made!" Dalton had little patience with such men. "You were both asleep when I passed this way!"

"No, sir-ree!" denied the second man, a short, heavy-set Ohioan. "Never wider awake in my whole life!"

"Then where's your rifle?" demanded Dalton.

"Say, what'n hell happened to my gun?"

"It's over there." Dalton pointed to the bushes. "I took it while you were asleep. Your pard was asleep with his weapon under his belly. It this ever happens again we're apt to pick you up at dawn with your throats cut."

"Jake, yuh ain't got the sense of a mule!" The Missourian was turning on the stout one now. "Yuh promised fair as anything yuh would let me catch just fifteen minutes of sleep, then yo'd 'wake me. Damn yuh, yuh oughta been killed!"

DALTON left them. The entire guard line was alerted now, half-dressed men and women in the wagon camp stirring. Duke Paulson came out of the shadows, the tall, looming figure of Matthew B. Honey behind him.

"What's the meaning of this, Dalton?" he demanded. "The entire camp's awake and scared to death."

"I didn't want another funeral just after breakfast, Paulson. When we have a little more light I think we'll find the bodies of five dead Indians up the river."

"Dead Indians!" Honey's wide mouth seemed to bang open. "What in Heaven's name do you mean, Dalton?"

"Just what I said." Dalton shrugged and started walking on back to his wagons. "Out here we always try to get five for one." He tightened back a smile. "Have to. There are so many more reds than there are whites. I'll check off Mississippi Dave Clark now as paid and accounted for. Goodnight, gentlemen."

"What a man," groaned the preacher. "What a man! Do you suppose, Mr. Paulson, he's telling the truth—or just trying to alarm us?"

"I think we'd better get lanterns and find out."

"And if you go prowling around with a lantern," called back Dalton, his smile unsurpressed, "we're yet apt to have a

funeral for breakfast. Some Indians have rifles. As a general rule they are good shots—very good if they see some damned fool standing there in the dark with a lantern blazing away in his hand!"

"He's right!" Honey was groaning again. "Lord, he's right!"

"Unless," leered Paulson, "his cheap dramatics are to startle the wits out of the women and children. For the life of me, sir," he lowered his voice, "I can't make myself trust that man, no matter how hard I try. At times something tells me he's only a devil in the shape of man, and I don't like to think of any man in that light."

Honey frowned. "And yet there are times when I wonder what we would do without him. I'm praying for him. I'm praying for everybody! There are times—as much as it hurts me to say it—that I feel our train is damned."

"Double-damned," nodded Paulson, "as long as that man and his unlettered gang remains among us."

Grace Honey had stepped quietly out of the shadows. "I heard what you said. If he kills ninety Indians to save one white in this train, then Mr. Apache Frank Dalton will still be all right as far as I'm concerned. It's the rest of us I'm beginning to wonder about."

"Grace!" Honey turned on her with both hands in the air as if to pull the sky down on her head. "Never in my life did I ever expect to hear such talk from my own daughter's mouth!"

"Dad, you're not back in Virginia." The girl faced him squarely, defiance now in her golden eyes. "You're in Montana, in the Indian Country, getting into the thick of it. Mr. Dalton knows, and he has told me. I believe in him. If it calls for a devil to take us through, then we're only lucky to have him. Otherwise, Dad—" she tapped him on the chest—"we may all go to hell fast in a great big pile."

CHAPTER FOUR

Yazoo Sam

THERE was more excitement at dawn. Few men could really believe what Dalton had told them. The first grayness of the morning light revealed everything. Men poured upstream in lines to gawk at the bodies of the five Cheyennes, young bucks all of them, out to make a record for themselves early in life.

Had those five young bucks managed to slip on through the lower lines, they could have done almost anything, their long knives silently slitting the hearts and throats of every man and woman asleep. Before stealing away they could have started fires in the wagons, and then, on the way out, they might have killed any of the other guards they had failed to account for on their way into the train.

None of Dalton's men bothered himself by stirring a rod to see the bodies of the reds. Dead Indians were good Indians. Once a red was shot or knifed, a white man would not have to fight or lie awake at night watching for him in the dark.

"An' when 'Pache Frank knifes or shoots one," nodded Yazoo Sam Flint, "then we know there ain't nothin' ever a-comin' from that particular Indian agin. They're through—an' a mighty good riddance for the peace an' soul of man. Reckon the parson's gonna wanta preach their funerals an' bury 'em 'fore we move on?"

"Hell, no!" answered big Rube Yardley. "Ever'body knows a damn Indian ain't got no more soul than a trail scout!"

Laughter rocked the rest of the freighters. They were a hard crew, a wild and generally fearless gang, used to all manner of things. Life was a game, and they played it for all it was worth. Hardships, death and the wildest of raw adventure were merely parts of it, no more to be

shunned or feared than food and drink.

There was not a mean bone in any of them, and they laughed when there was a chance to laugh. They held envy for no man. They killed an Indian because it was a part of the game. In this deal the play was all for keeps, winner take all, the knife or the gun his farewell salute for the one who suddenly headed for the Great Beyond.

As breakfast was cooking Dalton walked to the upper end of the train to suggest a hold-over of two or three days to give the stock a chance to rest and graze. Neither Paulson nor Honey would think of it. The parson was shocked, going white with anger, eyes widening with surprise.

"What," he cried, "after death has struck six times here! Sir, it's inhuman! We have women and children. *Women and children,* Mr. Dalton! They most certainly come before we concern ourselves with the lean and fatigued condition of oxen, mules and horses. They are only beasts of burden at best, placed here for the use of man!"

"Out here, parson, we have to think of them first. They are the line between life and death. When a man loses his horse or his oxen that is about the worst thing that can happen.

"My outfit's in good shape." He took time to lift his hat to Grace Honey, who had just stepped up. "It can travel. The rest is only a poor excuse for the trail. You'll realize that long before we're beyond that snow-capped peak you see shining ahead of us. I know that slope."

"But I've told you, Dalton," put in Paulson, "that we don't have to go through that high pass. I have charts showing a lower route, one along the waterways—"

"And twice I've told you," cut in Dalton with a nod, his patience beginning to wane, "what it means to try to take this train through it. There are actually two lower routes around the peaks. I've told you that." He was turning on his heel. "Take the train through either one, and, then, by God, you can call it murder!"

"We've made up our minds, Dalton." Honey cleared his throat. "I believe we will stick to it."

"WAIT, Mr. Dalton!" The girl came running after him before he had gone sixty feet. "Everything you have said is right, but I've never heard you talk of those lower routes. What is wrong with them?"

"Indians, ma'am." His tone was flat. "They'll be above you at either hand, the places so narrow and rough in spots below they can wipe out the entire train without firing a shot from a gun or an arrow from a bow."

"How?"

"Rocks." He smiled that thin, merciless smile. "Yes, ma'am, just plain rocks—at the start, anyway. They'll simply roll and kick them over the rims, and they'll come down by the thousands, tons and tons falling directly on the train. They'll kill the cattle in the yokes, the mules and horses in the harness. In the right spot they'll stop the train with smashed and rock-covered wagons. They'll roll down bundles of burning pinetops and brush, and then, ma'am," he shrugged, "everything will go to hell in one roar of flames and smoke, and the Indians will laugh at you while you're dying. Quite simple, now, isn't it, Miss Honey?"

"Yes, very!" she nodded, cold-faced and pale. "Simple for the Indians. You are not going that way, Mr. Dalton?"

"No. I'm not leading my outfit straight into a trap."

"Then, Mr. Dalton," she caught his arm, stopping him from moving on. "You're getting ready to split this train right here on the rim of the most dangerous country we can enter!"

"Ma'am." He shifted from one foot to the other. "Your father, Duke Paulson and Captain Amos Knight have told me a couple of times that they were getting along well enough before they ever saw or heard of my outfit. I don't want to split this train, but I'm not killing myself and my men."

"Frank, look!" She grabbed his arm. "There's trouble! Oh, God, would you just look at my father?"

It was a waste of words. Everybody wheeled to look at Matthew B. Honey. There had been a sound like a mule's iron-shod kick landing flatly against bone and muscle. Matt Honey seemed to have taken to a high flying backward jump in the air. His big wide black hat was above him, hung in the air up there like a buzzard arrested in mid-flight.

Coming down, and sprawled flat on his back, arms and legs gangled out at either side of him, hat dropping on his flat belly.

Old Yazoo Sam Flint had just knocked the sap out of the parson.

Dalton yelled, but he could never have been in time. Duke Paulson snarled something, lunging in to strike a wild blow at Yazoo Sam. The old man ducked, and came up like a sapling writhing in a gale.

Suddenly there was another crack that sounded exactly like the one that had landed on Matthew B. Honey's lean, hard jaw. This time it was a blow driving straight to Duke Paulson's chin. Paulson went back down flat, his fine beaver flying, the glower of a dazed bull in his dark eyes and face.

"SAM! SAM!" Dalton caught him by the arm, giving him a quick jerk and swinging him around. Usually easy-going, hard-to-start, Yazoo Sam Flint was like a drunken Comanche at a war-dance now—ready to fight everything in sight. "You can't do it!"

"Can't do *what?*" snarled the old man, still trying to break away. "Yuh mean I didn't hit that damn fool Paulson hard enough to flatten 'im? Turn me loose, 'Pache! I'll kick them shining big teeth down his throat and spit in the middle of 'im!"

"Let me at him, Dalton!" Paulson was up, howling like a fool. "I'll attend to the old devil now. I'll kill him."

"Keep away from him, Paulson!" Dalton shoved the struggling Flint back at arm's length and thrust himself between them.

"Let me at him, I tell you!" Duke Paulson had become an out-and-out madman, a wild-eyed, snarling, slobbering and dancing ape, his hands pawing and clawing talons, murder roaring in his heart. "Don't try to stop me! No man can hit me and live! Turn him and let me hit him, I tell you! Turn him, damn you, Dalton, or I'll kill you, you low-born Texas rake!"

"Hold Sam." Big Rube Yardley and Link Hardy came rushing up, more of the freighter outfit's gang hot behind them. Dalton gave Sam Flint a shove, staggering him backward and landing him in Yardley's long, strong arms. Yardley grabbed and hugged him with the strength of a grizzly.

Whirling, Dalton faced Paulson. "You didn't need to say that about me, you cheap looking honkytonk tout! Now, by God, put up your fists and fight like a man."

"Don't do it, Frank!" Grace Honey called out.

"Come, gentlemen!" Matt Honey was back on his feet, wall-eyed, white-faced and shaky. "Act like men, not like half-witted children. Flint is just an ignorant fool! I'm the one he struck down!"

"You're the *one!*" howled Paulson, dancing backward and getting the spurs of his feet caught in his fine hat. "Just what in the hell do you think I was doing there on the ground?"

Dalton caught the girl firmly by the shoulders and pushed her aside. "Please.

It won't take more than a few seconds!"

"No, Frank, don't!" Grace Honey threw herself flat against his stomach, both arms flying around him. "Dad, grab Mr. Paulson! Grab him and get him away from here before somebody kills him!"

"Keep your nose out of it Miss Honey!" raged Paulson. "All I want is one good smash at that damned Texas face! I said he was a low-born! A low-born he is!"

"All right, Paulson, here she comes." Dalton caught the girl under the armpits, lifted her off the ground, and swung her into her father's long arms. "Sorry, Miss Honey. Take care of your daughter, parson! Watch yourself, Paulson—this is it!"

He went into Duke Paulson like a hurricane hitting a hillside of loose sand. A left feint opened his guard. A smashing right fist slammed to a flat, sickening crack on his nose and mouth. Paulson seemed to take to the air. He went down, rump straight on his hat, turning that already broken and battered thing into a crushed pancake, and suddenly his hands were pawing drunkenly for his waistline—a mad man trying to go for his weapon.

THE rest was still the hurricane in all its fury. Paulson was snatched back to his feet. Another blow smashed against his nose and mouth, and blood and broken teeth flew. He went down again, now in a flying backward sprawl, and this time he was out cold, the world a voiceless black space.

Dalton was not yet through. He bent over and snatched Paulson's revolvers from his waist-band—two gold-plated little things—and pitched them to the grinning Link Hardy. Now he picked up Paulson by the back of his collar and the seat of his tight pants. With a furious swing he swished him into the air, straight overhead and held him there at arm's length. Walking right on out between the ends of two of the wagons he came to the river-bank. It was almost straight-down here for ten feet, the water deep and blue.

"Cool off, now!"

With a heave, Dalton sent the unconscious man flying out into space, a rolling, loose-legged, loose-armed thing going down. He landed on the surface of the river with a tremendous splash, the water closing over him. Without waiting to see whether he stayed down or came up, Dalton turned to walk back to Matt Honey. Before he had taken six paces the girl was again in front of him. She had just one question to ask:

"Did you really have to do that?"

"Did it hurt you, ma'am?" He looked straight into her pretty eyes. "If it did, then I'm sorry."

"But it didn't!" she cut in quickly, and he could have sworn he caught a smile in her eyes. "Please don't do that to Dad! He might fly to pieces. But watch Mr. Paulson." She glanced on past him to the river's edge. "He's not like you. He's not the kind to fight fair."

"Dalton!" Honey's voice was a roar. "I've been grossly assaulted by one of your heathen ruffians! Also, sir, I've just watched you throw the poor, helpless Mr. Paulson in the river!"

"Do you want to join him?" Frank Dalton was smiling now, but there were dancing little imps of hell in his eyes. "Fighting, you said last night, was not your business. The best thing you can do was to keep out of it. I don't yet know why Yazoo Sam Flint struck you, and I only entered this thing to stop it, but—"

"I can tell yuh all about it, Frank." Sam Flint had managed to slip loose from Yardley and was walking forward. "Tell 'im what yuh said about 'im, Honey! Then I'll tell mine! I—"

"Never mind any of it!" cried the girl. "Let everything come to a stop right where it is. And you, Dad, mind your business and your quick-tongue. Because you claim to be a preacher it's no sign you

have the right to rule people's lives!"

"Grace! *Grace!*" stormed Honey, his fists lifting above his head. "What in the world has come over you?"

"Gawd A'Mighty, look yonder!" Flint's voice was almost a yell as he stared at the dripping-wet figure of Paulson crawling up over the rim of the river's bank. "Ain't he the ugliest, wettin'est lookin' son-of-a—"

"Sam!" snapped Dalton.

Flint looked around with a grin. " 'Pache, bust my belly or neck, I'm gonna tell yuh what that long-legged, gander-necked, chest-beatin' jackass called yuh. He said yuh was a bloody-handed, bloody-bellied an' plum heartless dramatist. Dram, hell. I told 'im yuh didn't touch a drop!"

"Never mind, Sam. I've been called a lot worse, and none of it has yet mattered."

"But what's a dramatist?" snarled the old man. "Ain't that a belly-floatin' whiskey-head what—"

"Grace!" Honey's voice was booming down everything again. "Get yourself back to our wagons where you belong, and stay there! Hear me?" He stamped the ground furiously. "And right here in front of him I'll tell you to get away from that character Dalton, and stay away from him!

"From this instant on I forever forbid you to speak to him. He wants to split this train. That's all he's working for. Let him split it! Get on back to those wagons, *right now!*"

"Dad, let me tell you something." The girl faced him unflinchingly. "This train is going to split—if Duke Paulson and his so-called Captain Amos Knight has anything more to do with the leading. You and Mr. Paulson will be the cause of it. More than half of these people will follow Frank Dalton. I'll be one of them. You can come with me—or go with Paulson. That's all I have to tell you. Nothing you can say or do will cause me to change my mind. I want to live, not die!"

Matthew B. Honey was too shocked to answer. Grace Honey had said everything. He was like something suddenly drained of all its blood, mouth sagging, eyes popping, face like chalk.

Paulson was there on the rim of the river behind Dalton now. His head was down, everything about him still dripping yet. His long black hair had flapped down over his forehead, his eyes dull and listless, little trails of blood still seeping from his broken nose and lips. He had heard all of it, and he looked like a man with the world torn from under him.

CHAPTER FIVE

Red Hell

"WE'RE goin' with Apache Frank Dalton." The talk was soon everywhere, at every late breakfast fire. "Devil or no devil, he knows the Indians an' the trails out here. Even the preacher's daughter knows that."

"An' he's right about a rest-up. Ever' ox, ever' mule an' hoss is nigh dead on its feet in our outfit. They've gotta rest an' graze."

"There's work needed on a lot of wagons, too. They've been shooken an' shattered, rocked an' racked to all thunder an' Dalton's seen all that."

There was only one thing to do. Dalton kept his mouth shut, and ordered all his men to keep silent. He knew this country. Paulson, Honey and Knight didn't. The only thing Knight knew about the frontier was the Missouri River. Beyond that no one in Dalton's outfit had been able to glean a thing, and the management of this train was proof enough of that.

Long after sunrise the wagons were still in their tight circle. Dalton was keeping himself and his crowd at the lower end of the train, having given no order for the stock on the slopes to be brought in. Meanwhile the oxen, the mules, and horses were

taking full advantage of it, grazing and resting. Three or four days of this would really fill their bellies and get a lot of their strength back.

The valley was safe in daylight, but all the freighter men kept a close watch on the distant hills and slopes. A scout's eyes always roved and were never still. They saw everything, and apparently without effort whatever. Every little wisp of cloud on a skyline might have a meaning. A quick flight of quail or sage hens flashing over a distant rise could mean that something had startled them.

Nine times out of ten it meant men, white or red. Day-moving and grazing wild animals rarely disturbed them—the deer, the elk, the antelope and the buffalo being no natural enemy, the fowl often feeding in the middle of enormous buff herds.

It was almost noon before they saw Duke Paulson again, the older men of the freighter outfit watching him from the corners of their eyes. Dalton paid no attention to him. He would be a dangerous enemy. A slight, bald-headed little Dr. Ira Smith had dressed his fist wounds, taking stitches in his nose and lips. His missing teeth were not to be replaced, and a man with his vanity could not have helped hating the world when he took a look at himself in a mirror and saw all the pads and court plaster masking his face.

Matt Honey seemed to have suffered no more than a red lump the size of a hen's egg on the point of his stern, square chin. He was going everywhere, the long wings of his frock-tailed coat spanking briskly. He stopped beside wagons, talking low and earnestly with people. Everybody at the lower end of the camp knew what he was trying to do.

"An' he ain't havin' a lot of luck about it," chuckled Rube Yardley. "He's tryin' to make 'em pull out with him an' Paulson an' Knight. There ain't enough noddin' of heads. There's too much shakin' em, 'cause they know he's only parrotin' for Duke.

"But look, Pache, I heard what the purty Honey gal told the parson. Man to man, just what'n hell can she do but pull out with 'em if he does decide to go with Paulson an' Knight?"

"She'll go over the Squaw Crest with us." Dalton was suddenly smiling. "That is, if she's still of that mind. But I'm not sure that enough people are going to be fools enough to pull out."

"But just in case they do pull," insisted Yardley, "an' Honey says she's to go with them?"

"She'll still go over the Squaw Crest!" Old Yazoo Sam answered him. "Yuh might know that, yuh big fool!"

IT WAS already a split train. Everybody felt it coming. Matt Honey's going the rounds now was not helping his cause. When noon came not a wheel had been broken from its tracks. A gang of Dalton's men had saddled up.

Six of them, having a notion for wild fowl, rode down the river, each carrying a shotgun with his rifle and six-shooters. Others scattered to the higher places, looking for larger game and Indian sign, guns soon banging or crashing in the distance.

Dalton was saddling a tall bay for himself when Grace Honey came walking quietly down through the train and stopped just behind him.

"Saddle two, Frank." That same cold, determined expression was in her face. "I'll go with you, wherever it is."

"Put leather on the white mare, Dink!" Dalton gave the order to a big, black-bearded and one-eyed bullwhacker, then turned to lean against his horse as he looked soberly at the girl. I suppose it'll cause a hell of a row, Grace."

"Thanks, Frank." She smiled, the coldness leaving her face like a flash. "From now on let it be just Grace to you."

"It should have been like that from the

start, Grace." His face had grown serious. "I felt that way, and somehow knew it would be like this all along."

"Sure of yourself?"

"Positive!" He smiled now. "I just didn't want to start going all-out for you at a jump—like Paulson was going."

"Grace!" Matt Honey was suddenly popping up, long tails flapping. "Where are you going?"

"Frank hasn't yet said." She turned and faced him. "I'm sure it won't be so far we can't be back for supper."

"Grace, you're not going anywhere." Honey was getting ready to call the sky down again. "Not with that man."

"What?" Yazoo Sam Flint had stepped up, unbuttoning his sleeves and spitting in his hands. "Seems she's said her little piece. Get right with yoreself, Honey." He tapped him on his broad, bone-hard chest with a gnarled forefinger.

"Frank ain't a bit hard to get along with if yuh just try a little. Somethin' tells me yuh wouldn' be, if yuh wouldn't be tryin' to run ever' damn thing in sight. Paulson's through, an' Amos Knight never had sense enough to get started. Better change yore saddle an' swing over to the wild herd. We'll take yuh through, an' Duke Paulson will take yuh only to hell. Have a chaw of tobacco an' let yore tail-feathers down."

Dalton and the girl rode away, leaving them there. Sam Flint was all right now. There would be no fight. Enough men were here. This time Honey would have sense enough to hold his tongue.

Swinging to the crest of the great ridge to southward, Dalton pulled rein, the girl just to his left. A couple of look-outs were on down the other side of the slope, watching the country. Dalton was now looking at a tall, inky-black cloud rising in the still, clear air from somewhere far beyond Squaw Crest.

"That's odd, Frank." The girl stirred uneasily in her saddle. "I can't remember ever seeing such a black cloud in the north, and on such a perfect day, too."

"It's not the kind of a cloud you think it is, Grace." He glanced at her, then looked steadily back at the black smear against the blue sky. "That can be a wagon train. On the other hand, it could be the big store and the settlement on Rattlesnake Flats. In this country, you know, you can see a long ways—as much as two hundred miles on a clear, sharp day."

"Not—Indians!"

"Indians." He nodded, face grim. "They're ahead of us, all around us. That's why I have even the south slopes watched here."

"And we'll fight them?"

"They'll fight us," he corrected with a smile. "They'll attack. We'll merely try to hold them off of us, and go on through."

"And when you get to Rattlesnake Flats," her hand was suddenly on his arm and she was looking at him closely, "you'll stop and the rest of us will go on?"

"Everybody, maybe, except one." He had suddenly flipped her hand away and caught her arm, gripping it. "That'll be Grace Honey. I was a fool about her from the first day, and I've been getting worse every hour since. Grace Honey stays with me no matter where in hell I go. Is that clear to all of you?"

"Check!" She looked at him with a thousand little lights sparkling in her eyes. "Let me be there when you tell Dad. I really don't want to see you throw him in the river!"

CHAPTER SIX

Contraband

THERE WERE sage hens and antelope steaks for supper when they finally rode back to the train. In addition—rarest of the rare—there were three huge pails of wild honey. One of the men had spotted a bee-tree, a large, dead and hollow oak on the bank of the stream, and two had

come banging back to camp for the pails and a couple of axes.

Tub Yawberry and All-Belly Brown were the pair, both bullwhackers. The bees had worked them over, lumping their fat faces, their hands and arms, closing All-Belly Brown's right eye, but to the victors in the end had belonged the spoils.

"Watch Paulson," growled Flint, "an' I mean watch 'im, 'Pache. That gander-neck ain't the kind to forget that knockin'-about an' the river-duckin' yuh give 'im. Honey as good as said so when I got 'im cooled down. He ain't too bad, Honey ain't. Just got mixed up with the wrong man an' somehow can't jerk 'imself loose. Paulson's gonna try to kill yuh from behind—or have it done. He has a lot of pull on Amos Knight, an' Knight has say-so with others."

A word to the wise was enough. Paulson was keeping out of sight, too vain to let much of himself be seen with all that mess on his face and people ready to start whispering behind his back.

The girl had gone on back to her father's four big wagons, self-sure, knowing just what she was going to do, no argument or browbeating going to change her mind. Just as she had said she would be, she was back at sundown, sitting in the grass beside Dalton, having supper with him and his wild-haired, wild-bearded crew.

"Paulson swears to push on at sunrise," she told him. "I'm not even certain of Dad. He knows I'm not going the lower routes."

Supper was at an end, when sudden excitement struck the north side of the camp, everybody jumping up and running and climbing out between the wagons to stand and stare.

A rider on a tall, skeleton-like black horse had appeared out of the north and was coming down the last slope to the river. He was tall and lean, garbed in ragged buckskins, his hat gone, a bloody bandage around his head, the head of a broken arrow and a four-inch piece of its shaft hung in the cantle of his saddle.

As he came closer they saw that he rode with his right forearm pinned in the bosom of his shirt, the sleeve of the shirt stiff with dried blood.

"It's Wild Hoss Pete Jackson!" cried one of Dalton's men. "One of the best Army Scouts in the business!"

They watched him come on to the river, the skeleton horse appearing to reel as he shuffled to the water's edge and lowered his head to drink. The man in the saddle stared on across the stream peering through swollen red lumps of eyes. Most of his hair and beard were burned from the left side of his face. Dalton, Flint and a gang of others were soon around him, making certain that he did not topple from his saddle and fall in the water.

"Rattlesnake Flats!" he grunted when they helped him down and laid him flat on his back in the grass. Dr. Ira Smith came trotting up with his black bag. "Bull Ricker's store an' the settlement, too. Ever'thing. I've been in a thousan' fights in a thousand places, but it was the worst I reckon I ever saw. Fifteen hundred Cheyennes, I guess. Loaded to the guts with arms, good shootin' guns, an' cryin' for blood."

"We saw the smoke not long ago," put in Dalton. "It looked bad!"

"But is warn't the smoke of Rattlesnake." The old man tried to smile. "She went up three days ago. What yuh saw was from a big wagon train snakin' in from the east an' off the Missouri Train. They was hittin' it 'fore dawn this mornin'. I was in the timber, still a-tryin' to get away with maybe forty or fifty young bucks behind me an' flankin' me at either hand. I saw the smoke beginnin' to rise when I looked back from high on Squaw Crest."

"Could we get through on the lower trails?"

"Lower trails!" The old scout's swollen

eyes seemed to bulge. "Good Gawd, when has a man like 'Pache Frank Dalton been fool enough to ax that? No! In quiet times they'd rock yuh to death from the rims. As it is now, yuh won't make it through Squaw Crest. Better set yoreself an' fight it out here, 'cause they're a-comin'.

"There ain't no hope for that wagon train, though there was two more scouts in Rattlesnake Flats with me who set out to try to break through from Bull Ricker's store when we all saw that the settlement was a-goin'. They went to try to get soldiers from up the Ruby, but each knowed when he pulled out that there was only one chance in forty of 'em gettin' through.

"Set yoreself, 'Pache. Yo've got one of the damndest fights yuh ever saw comin' up, an' she'll come fast. Save what yuh can, an' may Gawd he'p yuh. He'll have to work fast."

IT WAS about all they could get out of him, and more than enough. The doctor waved everybody aside. As he cut and ripped away the buckskin shirt he was finding more wounds, knife, arrow and rifle ball.

"I knowed yuh was a-comin' through, 'Pache," he muttered. "Had to get to yuh. See to it—if yuh—can—that I'm buried in—some kind of a box. Never did like a blanket—an' the damn ground."

The doctor looked up a few minutes later, sweeping the staring circle with a glance. Now he folded the quiet old scout's hands across his chest, face grim for a moment. His eyes met Dalton's eyes. Dalton was taking off his big hat, Grace Honey beside him. Dr. Smith spoke:

"I've heard of his kind all my life," he grimaced, still looking at Dalton. "This is the first time I've had the opportunity of witnessing it. He gave his all for a friend—and his friend's friends!"

"And he will be buried in a box." Grace Honey's voice was low and firm. "I have an unusually large cedar hope chest in one of the wagons. I'll empty my things from it, and he'll go in the ground in the chest."

"Ma'am, that's plain damn' white of yuh!" Old Yazoo Sam Flint looked at her with misty eyes, his hat in his hand. "Wild Hoss would shore appreciate it, I know, but I think yuh can keep yore chest. One of them big oak cases in either of Mr. Paulson's four wagons would be just right, an' yonder stouter an' longer-lastin', I think.

"Yuh know what I mean, Paulson!" He glared at the swollen, plaster-faced Paulson now. "Yore wagons are loaded hell-deep with guns yuh aim to sell somehow to Indians atter yuh get settled in these parts, but yuh may never live to settle anywhere, onless yuh bust out ever'thing here and' pass 'em 'round as extra tools to fight with.

"Don't faint or fall dead!" he jerked up his hand. "An' don't paw at yore waistline. Link Hardy, I know, give yuh back yore golden little pop-guns, but they won't help in this crowd. Maybe we're just lucky yuh did bring along them guns. Anything to stop an Indian!"

NIGHT settled peacefully. There was intense excitement in the train, but it was quiet, a baby or a youngster letting go with a squawl here and there. All the water barrels had been filled on the wagons, the outer ones brought inside. The river itself was only a couple of rods away at most places, but two rods were sometimes as far to go as miles when things were really hot.

Grace Honey and some of the quieter ones had gone to the others, talking to them. Fires were out. When it was dark enough men had set to work outside the wagons, digging a long trench and throwing up the earth in a great arch on the south side of the train.

Duke Paulson was like a man already sent to hell. Everybody knew his secret.

Men leered at him, women scoffed at him, children had made faces and thumbed their noses at him, forgetting that there were many men out here like him. He had no deal with Indians. Guns were simply something a man could trade. He had seven hundred, all of them Civil War muskets with barrels and boxes of ammunition—not at all the better rifles real gunrunners were getting to the reds these days. Most Indians were already laughing at muskets such as these. Dalton had kept down the threatening violence when the mobs were raiding the wagons.

"You're only a money-hungry fool, Paulson," he had told him. "Sam Flint hasn't yet told me how he knew what you were carrying, but I could see that your wagons were too heavy for ordinary things. From now on let your conscience be your keeper."

It was enough. Never a bully, always detesting such men, Dalton was not one to press the issue. His sole interest was here, and the wait was long. Men, women and children slept, knowing there were guards all around.

The body of Wild Hoss Pete Jackson was yet unburied, left as mute evidence of the danger around them, something to keep the train on its toes. It lay now on one of the long musket cases, covered with a strip of canvas, women and children and most of the men taking a last glance at it before crawling away to sleep or slipping out of the train to go on guard.

Midnight came, a slight murk covering the heavens. It thickened up there before dawn. Far to the southwest lightning sheeted faintly, low flashes against the skyline. At one-thirty a few drops of rain fell. An hour before dawn it was raining steadily.

When a wolf howl came down from the high benches to the north, the stock was being squeezed back inside the great circle of wagons. By the time a coyote yapped on the crest of the high ridge everything was set.

"All 'round us. 'Pache." Flint came easing up in the darkness. "That was Link Hardy lettin' go that wolf howl. *There!*"

A rifle had crashed in the distance to southward, followed by a wild and fearful hammering of hoofs, and then more shots.

It was an old saw to the freighter men. Dalton had scattered them everywhere, hardened fighters to carry out every order and keep his less-hardened settlers in line. As the noise around grew greater there was a sound on the slopes as if all hell was rolling down and crashing through the timber to the river. A call lifted, clear as a bell.

"Hold your fire! Hold your places! This is the feint! Hold!"

"Let only the north side open up!" That came a few seconds later, the voice sharp but without fear. "Let them have it—*now!*"

Guns crashed, ribboning the darkness and rain. Out of the blackness north of the river, flames licked back, a furious crashing and popping. Suddenly a dozen flaming arrows were arching heavenward. Some of them struck wagons. Four came on inside the train, landing in the middle of the milling stock. A mule brayed, oxen began to bawl. Then the sweeping, side-smashing attack was gone, curving down the river, then back to higher ground, a vast spinning wheel continuing to shoot fire, in fluttering, smoking streaks.

"Southside, ready!" called out another voice. "Let go!"

HELL was coming in on that long-arched trench out there. Rube Yardley was in command of it, waiting until the last second. Now the guns were crashing lightning, the thunder of pony and horse hoofs was beyond it, Indians were screaming, yelling, eagle-screeching, their fire was terrific, burning arrows arching here, a full hundred and fifty of Paulson's muskets letting go with roars and clouds of smoke.

"Fire-wheelin' us, 'Pache." Flint came crawling up when it was at its worst, those riding rings swinging in to the north, the east, south and west, the noise that of a thousand boiler factories hammering, the anvils from half as many blacksmith shops ringing in furiously.

"Good way of comin', but we're a-holdin' 'em, an' these settler squirts are a fair bunch at that. Guess a lot of 'em was soldiers in the war."

Wagon tops were catching fire all around. Women, youths and spindle-legged girls were taking care of that, dipping pails in the well-filled barrels and wiping out the flames almost as soon as they were started—a strange bitter calmness everywhere in the desperate, deadly work.

"Here comes a straight-in charge!"

It was a sudden charge, the great ring or spinning wheel to southward appearing to flap into a wide, desperate rush. Horses going down, they came in, dashing right into the teeth of the fire, blazing arrows raining, all manner of guns crashing, then they were falling back, broken and thinned, scores dead or writhing down there on the ground.

It seemed no more than ten seconds later that a great awesome hush settled, the reds far back and out of range, the whites reloading their weapons under the cloud of gunsmoke and rain on their lines.

"They're pullin' off, 'Pache." Flint came back, muddy and dripping-wet as he eased up beside Dalton under the edge of a giant wagon. "I'm damned if I get it. We've held 'em, an' coulda held three or four times more, the way we're fixed. Wild Hoss said fifteen hundred hit Rattlesnake Flats. There shore'n hell ain't that many here."

"Five or six hundred, Sam. No more." Dalton turned on his heel and peered in the darkness behind them. "Has anybody yet seen Paulson?"

"No, but by the eternal I have seen Matt Honey." Flint grinned. "He was a-lyin' in the mud at the side of one of his wagons, a-shootin' like hell. The gal's what I don't understand. I saw her half-hidin' 'twixt two other wagons. She seemed to be watching for somebody with a big six-shooter belted 'round her. Maybe she's watchin for Paulson to come poppin' up—"

"Here they come agin!" yelled a wild

If a cowpoke jumped too slow for the red-haired girl boss of mighty Hammerclaw, he was plumb glad to jump one hell of a lot faster—into his own grave!

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voice out there in the rain. "Take 'em, men! It's the whole mob hittin' us in a bunch now!"

It was worse by far than any charge that had come in before. It was desperate redskin hell on the move, a great slam, a howling, screeching, shooting, arrow-blazing cloud sweeping maddeningly over the ground.

Stealing another peep from under the buckled-up canvas of a wagon just above Dalton, Duke Paulson took his last and only chance when he saw old Sam Flint hurrying away in the light of the flashing gunfire. Frank Dalton and no one on earth but Dalton was the cause of all this! Never had he grown to hate a man so quickly and so thoroughly, and in the wild shooting here no one in the world would ever be able to tell whose rifle bullet had killed him.

SLIDING his head under the canvas, Paulson eased the muzzle of an army carbine forward and down. A foot more and he could pull the trigger. The sudden stab of a six-shooter's muzzle in his ribs made him fire an instant too soon, his bullet smashing into the mud a yard to Dalton's right.

"Not tonight, Paulson!" Grace Honey's voice was sharp, fierce, yet drowned to only a hiss in the sudden rise in the firing outside, so intense now she had been unable to hear Paulson's carbine fire. "Drop that gun! I'll kill you if—"

Paulson cut her off. He was sliding forward, on and out of the wagon, for just a moment a wild expression of pain and terror in his face. Coming down on his head, heels kicking Dalton to one side, he flopped on over his back, a Cheyenne arrow through him, heart-high. In an instant the girl was dropping out of the wagon beside Dalton.

"He was going to kill you, Frank. I saw him."

"I know." He grabbed her and pulled her down beside him. "I heard his shot and saw his flash, and wheeled to kill him myself. The Cheyenne arrow beat me to it. But say nothing more." He put a wet hand over her mouth. "It'll be over in a minute. Get back under the wagon. You can hear it on the slope to the north—two or three of them, I think."

"Hear what?"

"Army bugles." He pulled her back under the wagon. "Troops are up there. They've split the big gang that hit Rattlesnake Flats. This is just a branch of it. Look. They've heard and are falling away—going to run for it, Grace."

"Then it's over!" she cried. "If Paulson had only waited—"

"He would have had a chance to kill me some other day," he cut in with a nod. "But say nothing about it. Let the others find him there lying dead across his carbine."

"And then," she looked at him wonderingly, "everybody'll say Duke Paulson died fighting the Indians. They'll call him a hero, Frank!"

"Sure," he nodded again, "but let it be like that. We'll go on in peace now, and somewhere ahead I'll be setting up a store of my own now that owner and store are gone at Rattlesnake Flats. Your father can pen a nice, glowing letter back to Paulson's people in Kentucky. Matt Honey won't know the difference. He'll think he died a hero—and this is a big, big country, sweetheart. It had room for lots and lots of heroes, dead and living."

"You're a big, big man, Frank Dalton!" she cried, throwing her arms around him, tears suddenly in her eyes, not realizing that the fight was at a quick end.

Troopers were storming down the slopes from northward, the battle-smoked settlers beginning to cheer all around.

"That's why I set my cap for you from the start!"

THE END

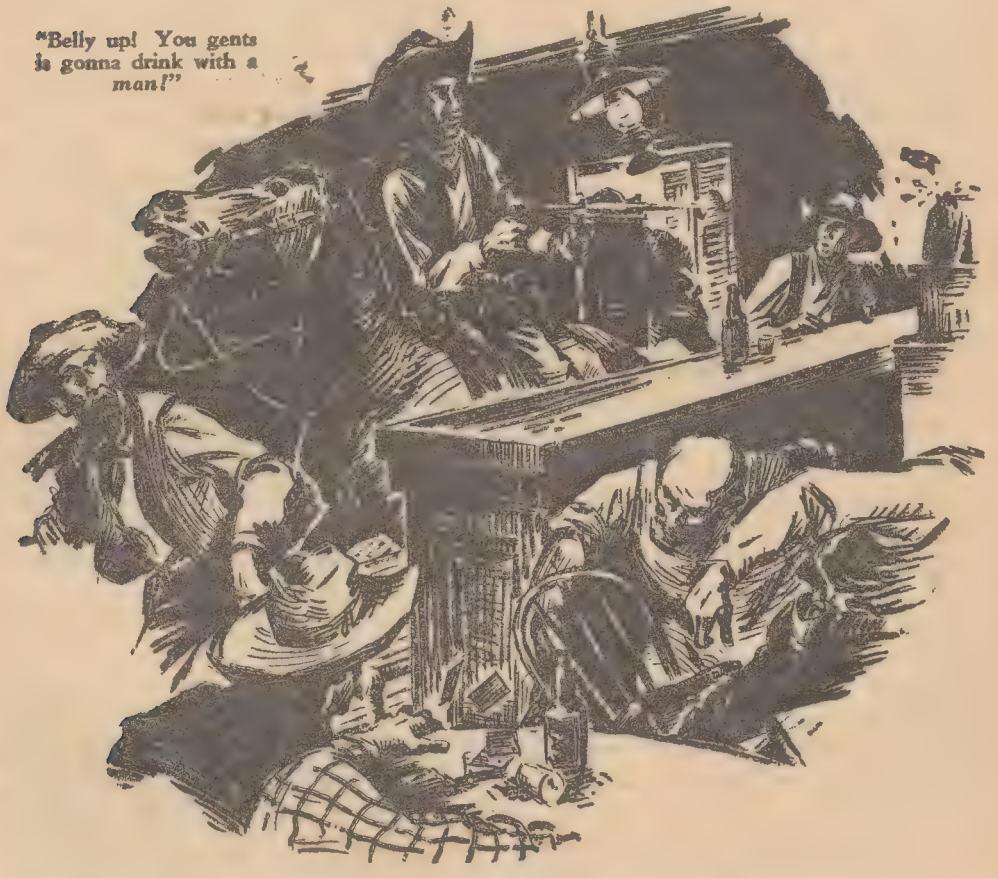
HELL-HOT WITH HIS HARDWARE!

By WILLIAM SCHUYLER

FEW MEN paid any attention to the dark, quiet swamper in McDuff's Saloon. Fewer knew his name or cared. He was "Hey you," to most of the patrons. "Hey you, sweep up somewhere else. You're gettin' dust in my beer."

Only Harvey McDuff used his name, and that seldom. "Clean up the spittoons, Ernie," he'd say. Ernie Elvins obeyed and never answered, never spoke at all unless he had to. He just plugged along and did his job. No complaints, no comment.

Ernie Elvins, whose given name of



"Belly up! You gents is gonna drink with a *man!*"

What was in the strange letter that magically changed a two-bit swamper into a two-gun killer—and a forgotten, one-horse town into a thundering, gun-flame frontier legend?

Ernest hadn't been used since his mother in Alabama stopped running her fingers through his curls, was a man somewhere under forty. His body had once been tall, heavy and straight. It was now turned in on itself, geared to broom, mop and rag.

No one marvelled at his skill with these instruments; the way his big hands flicked the broom in and out of corners, and things like that. Sure, McDuff's spittoons were the shiniest in the state; but who would stop to compliment the shiner? McDuff, for a while, praised his swamper's good work; and then he stopped, for Ernie would glower and move away to another corner.

Harvey McDuff was an oldtimer with a long memory. Far longer than the pokes and boomers who drifted into his saloon. Long enough to remember fifteen years back. He let Ernie be.

The stage came through Sinker Flat that day at noon as usual, to pause a minute at McDuff's and roll on toward Whiteface. It was one of Ernie's jobs to meet it, bring the driver a beer, and take the mail if there was any. He stood in the dust and waited for the team to pull up and Ed Johnson's hand to come down.

"Letter for you, Elvins," Ed said and exchanged an envelop for the beer. He drained the stein with four jumps of his larynx and returned it to Ernie. "That's all today." The whip flourished and the horses dug dirt. The Concord coach lurched back and then settled into its straps.

Ernie Elvins stood there and breathed the dust through his open mouth. The letter hung awkwardly from his fingers. A layer of mud formed on his tongue. His eyes were wide and round in the glare of the noon sun.

He stood that way until the burning in his eyes and the choking in his throat made him drop the letter and stein, and reach for his bandana. He spat and wept and turned back to the saloon.

A passing cowboy said, "Hey you! Dropped something." Ernie dumbly retrieved the envelope and stuck it in his shirt.

Inside, McDuff said, "Where's my stein?" Ernie looked at his employer without recognition and disappeared to the back room. McDuff shook his head. He mumbled, "Guess he's finally goin' loco," and went out for the stein himself.

ERNIE ELVINS sweated more than the hot day warranted. The paper thing in his pocket weighed like lead against his chest. He cowered from it like a whipped dog. After a while he screwed up his courage. He withdrew the envelop and dropped it on the table. In a minute he reached out and gingerly turned it face-up.

It was marked from Brampton. Just as he feared. Brampton, just across the river, only twenty miles—but another world, a forgotten world he'd hoped.

It was long minutes before he picked it up and then he held it in front of him, gripping it with quivering thumbs and forefingers.

What do they want with me? They said they'd leave me alone!

He ripped off the envelop. It was a short letter. A man could memorize it with one reading. Ernie read it through ten times. A strange look came into his eyes, stranger with each reading. The usual placid resignation gave way to a darting fire and then a blaze and finally a wild light. He let his breath out in a sharp "Whooee," and folded the letter carefully, buttoning his pocket over it. He shucked out of the apron, dropped it behind him and went through the window.

No one recognized the erect figure that strode down Sinker Flat's back street and into a one-room 'dobe at the west end of town. No one heard the "Whooees!" that punctuated a flow of profanity. No one heard the slap of tempered metal on

leather or the splash of water. No one smelled the vile Eau-de-Toilette-Water.

Half an hour later a cyclone struck Sinker Flat. It was one of those selective cyclones, the kind that picks a spot here to wreck, then a spot there. It started at Moe's Merc. Moe was waiting on a lady.

"For you, dear lady," Moe said, "I'll make this pratickly a gift. For anybody else it's 62c the yard; for you the whole piece only $3.00! Five and a half yards 62c materyul just $3.00." He never heard the lady's answer.

The swamper from Harvey McDuff's stamped through the back door of the store. The lady customer screamed a high, shocked, "Eeeeeeee!" and started to sway. Moe had to leap the counter to catch her. He was not as good at vaulting as selling and bowled his billowing, customer into the notions display.

She fainted in a blend of ribbons, buttons, spools, with an overplaid of the 62c material. Moe hoisted and patted and comforted to no avail; the lady was in a bona fide swoon. When Moe glared at the cause of it he nearly joined her. Elvins stood in full view, completely dressed in hat, gun belt, boots and long underwear. A more awe-inspiring sight could not be imagined.

The look on Ernie's face could not be pigeon-holed. It was frightening, glorious, truculent, demanding, emancipated—all these and more. The broad cheeks were shaved to a nicety, revealing the pits and scars of reckless youth. The chestnut hair glistened with grease and was parted meticulously in the middle and swept into plastered hooks on each side. The broad, callused hands were spread over the baggy hips of the underdrawers and the nails were trimmed and clean. The long-handled suit had been bought for comfort, not fit, and Ernie's great body was lost in its shapelessness. His wide mouth, thickened with much scar tissue, opened to speak.

"Ah'm *Trigger* Elvins and Ah've come for the best damn gear you got."

Moe, unable in his masculinity to succumb as the lady had, quickly reached the point of hysteria. He gulped, whistled and choked, and finally broke into an uncontrollable fit of laughter.

One long arm, accustomed for years to nothing more aggressive than swinging the handles of brooms and mops, shot forth. The balled fist briefly connected with Moe's chin-point. Moe, with the suddenness of a cue ball, went directly at the midriff of his reviving customer. She returned to her neutral position while Moe caromed toward the corner pocket. He missed and came up with a click against the counter.

ERNEST "Trigger" Elvins did not lower his eyes to his victims. He felt neither sympathy or victory. He stepped over them and went about his business. His discerning eye probed the shelves. It took no second thought to select a scarlet silk shirt with yellow stitching at the pockets and cuffs. It fit a little near but that was not important.

Like a magician pulling handkerchiefs from a tube, Trig emptied box after box of neck-scarves. He chose a creation of luminescent green with white polka dots. The pants were easy—a tight black pair with a cream buckskin seat. His boots were good and snug, saved from an earlier day.

For a moment—a short one—the Sinker Flat cyclone was dormant while it admired its flashing self in Moe's full-length mirrow. It smiled, then frowned, then gathered new fury and swept through the door onto the street.

A plainsman seeks a coulee or a cave, a farmer dives into his root cellar when whirling clouds auger trouble. The merchants of Sinker Flat had no such warning. The storm descended on them with sudden ferocity. No timely notification

saved them from its terrible swift fury.

It gathered what it wished into its gaudy turmoil and left busted jaws and blackened eyes behind to gape and stare at ravaged merchandise. The saddlemaker, the hardware man, the stable owner, the gunsmith and finally Harvey McDuff himself.

McDuff had a long memory, as we've said before—long enough to remember a character named Trigger Elvins. He was probably the only man in Sinker Flat who knew Trigger Elvins *when*. For he had owned a bar in Brampton in Trigger's wild days. He had known him in his raucous youth, his brief triumph, his defeat.

He knew about Sheriff Dancy, the five years in jail, the sworn revenge, the second defeat. He had hired his remains. He understood the workings of the man yet he could not be nonchalant when Elvins rode, with all his purloined finery, through the batwings of his saloon. The customers fled to the corners and under the tables.

Harvey McDuff reached a long club from under his bar. "Ernie," he demanded, "get to hell off'n that horse and clean them spitcans!"

Elvin's triumphant eyes took no note of this command. They glared around the room until they chose an ornate display of dummy whiskey bottles. Twin beauties flashed up from their holsters and drummed accurate lead until the necks of five bottles were neatly shattered. Up to that moment the crowd had been mesmerized and curious. Now they fled for the doors and windows.

Elvin's Alabama voice and Texas guns took command. "Stay! You vahmints is goin' to drink with a *man*!" He dismounted with a leg-over vault and snatched the club from McDuff's grip. He broke it and dropped the fragments on the floor. He patted McDuff's bald head. "Ah loves you like a brothah but you got the damndest habits." He turned to the apprehensive gathering. "Any of you who cain't trust his itchy fingahs best check the hahdware on the bah. That goes most special for you shahp-nosed Yankees gathered by the piano." The men referred to did not stop to argue geography. They smiled wanly and joined the drinking.

McDuff quickly submerged any further desire to restore his authority over his swamper. He didn't want trouble and he knew that Trigger had always meant trouble when he was like this. It might be—McDuff hoped so with all his heart—that Trigger just wanted to raise hell for a day. And it might be that Trigger was reverting to the days of ten, fifteen years ago when his reigns of terror ran men out of business and made people spike their doors shut.

McDuff had liked him even then and that's the reason he'd hired him when he was broken in spirit. Trigger's doings were Davis County history. McDuff looked around at his customers—not a one of them was a Davis County man. Not one of them knew what he might be in for this afternoon. None of them could know that Trigger Elvins wasn't just a swamper gone wild.

McDUFF was afraid and yet he was eager at the same time. Eager to see what would happen next. Seeing Trigger like this, flashing, vigorous, erect and rolling out that brogue of his, brought back the picture of Ezekiel Dancy. Sheriff Zeke Dancy of Davis County had been the one to stop Trigger cold.

A cool, handsome yankee from Vermont, Zeke was, and he loved the West and he loved his job. He didn't dislike Trigger but Trigger on the loose was more than a sheriff's patience could stand. So they had it out and Trigger landed in jail. A night in jail didn't do any good, so Dancy nailed him again and tried it for a week. No good. By this time, Trigger

hated Dancy with all his heart and had found out he was a yankee. He did every thing he could to badger the lawman into a finish gunfight. They both nearly got killed when it came to a head, but the law had the final word.

Trigger was sent to prison for five years. McDuff remembered what Trigger was like when he got out—morose and surly, five years planning for a revenge corked up in his mind. It was then that he found that his enemy had married his sister, his baby sister, his only sister, Ella Elvins. The starch went out of him completely. He left Brampton and wandered aimlessly until he found McDuff's place in Sinker Flat. He worked for drinks for a while and then gave up the drinking and just worked—silent and beaten.

History set out to repeat itself. Trigger Elvins unfastened two buttons of his new shirt and the undershirt. He forced open a rusty safety pin from which hung a cotton bag. It did not contain asafetida as most of his audience feared, but greenbacks. The grimy accumulation of five years of sober swamping. He peeled out a ten spot and flung it at his former boss.

"Serve these gentlemen, suh!"

McDuff squinted his eyes at Elvins but saw no sign of bluff or weakness. He filled the bar with bottles and glasses. There was a hasty gulping of free liquor but no one seemed daring enough to open the festivities with a toast or a *whoopee*.

"Fill 'em again, suh, and let's have some noise!" Trigger Elvins stalked among the drinkers until he found a man who admitted to some skill at the pianoforte. He carried the man to the instrument. "Play, suh, and make it lively!"

His next victim was a young man whose golden beard had not yet felt need of a razor. "Youah purty enough to sing." The boy was carried to the piano. He laid strong hands on the shoulders of his entertainers and commended them in grating undertones, "Get together and play good. I'll see that McDuff keeps youah whistles wet."

McDuff's Saloon began to rock. The liquor flowed, the music rang, McDuff sweated and watched Elvins, pleading with his former butt-boy not to start a shooting match. The Trigger Elvins of old could not finish an evening without an exercise of his sixgun skill. McDuff prayed that the dummy-bottle practice would suffice—but knew that it would not.

One dapper gentleman whose ulcers prohibited him from indulging retreated to a far end of the bar where his temperance would not be noticed. Whenever Elvins caught his eye he would raise his glass in salutation and make a great show of draining it of liquid it did not contain. Once he tried to excuse himself on matters of business. Elvins put a wide hand against his elegant shirt front and restrained him gently.

"Suh," he said, "What's youah name?" The gleam in Elvins' eye was fired to a keen flame by this time and no man in his right mind would attempt to change it to a hot blast of anger.

THE dapper man smiled benignly and lied through his teeth. "*Beauregard* Swanson, suh, at youah service." His southland brogue was so thick it would have to be scraped from the bar in the morning. In a very few moments, Mr. Swanson was to regret his acting ability.

Elvin's eyes danced and sparked. "Did you say, *Beauregahd*, suh?"

"Yes, Beauregard Swanson."

"Any relation to the Gen'l, suh?"

"Yes, suh. Uncle on my mothuh's side." He preened himself on the success of his pose. He felt Elvins' long arm and great hand encircle his shoulders, pulling him away from the bar.

"You, Mistuh Beauragahd Swason, are the man Ah'm lookin' foah. A true S'uth'n gentleman." Elvins' hand came away from Swanson's shoulder and re-

turned with a hearty slam which dislodged his upper plate and left him speechless if not quite breathless. Elvins' voice quieted to a confidential whisper.

"You are goin' to help me settle an impohtant mattuh. Ah have a family piece o' business to reg'late in Brampton 'n Ah need a gentlemen of youah standin' foah a witness, as Ah'll be dealin' with a yankee rascal, name of Dancy." The fire in Elvins' eyes flickered brightly as if someone had opened the bottom draft. Mr. Swanson gulped and paled and wondered what evil this large man was pondering. "Are you with me, suh?" Elvins insisted.

"Yes suh!" Swanson managed to sound convincingly agreeable to the unknown.

With that, Elvins jarred his teeth loose again and the Sinker Flat cyclone picked up speed. "Ah knew you wouldn't refuse me. Now that that's settled we must get you a propuh mount, suh." He swung his eyes around the carousing saloon. "Theah's mah old fren' Mort Osborn—Mort kindly furnished that purty sorrel you saw me on. Ah knows he'll be delighted to pick another foah mah escort."

He swarmed through the crowd and buttonholed the stable-owner. He towered over the smaller Osborn and roared at him with such convincing pressure that there was little hesitation before the man left to procure a second horse. In rapid succession Elvins proceeded to corner the saddlemaker, the hardware man and the gunsmith. These gentlemen had accepted their bruises stoically and had come to join the fun in part repayment for the earlier ravages of the Sinker Flat cyclone. From the looks on their faces now, they were being blown about again.

While the persuasive Elvins was doing this, a very pale Mr. Swanson—who sold casket fittings and funeral clothes for a living—was frantically beckoning to McDuff. The saloon man caught the signal and asked, "What's the matter, Mister, didn't your Southern accent make the grade? Sounded mighty fine to me!"

"Too well, I'm afraid!" His eyes were wet with fear. "Who is this man? What is he planning to do? What connection does he have with a party named Dancy in Brampton? He insists that I accompany him on his—uh—mission, whatever it is; and I see him now, shouting at that man over there to get me a pair of revolvers. I'm scared to death of guns! What will I do? I'm scared to death—you must help me!"

"Did you say Dancy in Brampton?" McDuff asked.

"Yes. Why? What's the matter? Tell me."

"You're in a spot, mister. You've been invited to a shootin'." McDuff glanced over at the reincarnated Trigger Elvins. "I should'a known it wouldn't last."

"What wouldn't last?" asked Swanson.

"You wouldn't understand, mister. Five years ago Trig thrun away his guns, sold his horse and burned his saddle. He let people kick 'im around what he didn't used to speak to. He come to work for me as swamper. Never been in trouble since —*until today.*"

"What happened today?" asked Swanson, who by now was the color of a bar rag. Inside him, his dyspeptic stomach felt as though it was harboring a freshly heated branding iron.

"Dunno," McDuff answered truthfully. "Musta got some message from the stage driver 'cause all this here dates from then."

"My God!" Swanson cried weakly. "Here he comes for me again."

"Theah you ah, Mistuh Beauregahd, suh. Ah've got you fixed up propuh. Now you and Ah have some real smaht drinkin' to do 'foah we staht. McDuff, get out a bottle of the best foah Mistuh Beauregahd and me!" Elvins made the order with a lordly gesture and McDuff scurried to obey.

IF Mr. Swanson—whose name, by the way, was really Elmer—thought he was frightened and sick before, he was to reach new heights of torture when he and his protector-patron-tormentor shared a quart of red-eye, drink for drink.

"Youah a man's man, suh," Elvins commented when they were down to the last pint. By this time, the entire drunken crowd was gathered around them, grinning, cheering, singing. Some of them knew Swanson from other trips he'd made to this county and they were eager to see which drink would finally turn the trick. The wise ones hung back at a safe distance, certain that the eruption would be violent, and not caring to be decorated.

There was a stubborn streak in Elmer "Beauregard" Swanson, however, and he was suddenly determined to show these fools that all boomers were not tender. He relaxed the tense hold he had on himself and allowed a superior smile to cross his lips. He quaffed his liquor with abandon. A mellowness entered his wet brown eyes and gave him the appearance of a lapdog who has knocked over the mistress's tonic and partaken heavily.

In no time at all he was clouting Trigger Elvins on the back to emphasize the points of stories he was telling. Elvins accepted him to his heart and encouraged him to drink more. They were in the midst of drinking a curse to the damyankees when two shots rang through the blend of music and tumult.

The crowd parted from the door to Elvins as cleanly and surely as a barber parts your hair.

A middle-sized man, whose black hairline could nearly be confused with his tangled brows, stood straddle-legged just inside the batwings. His guns were returned to their holsters and his arms were jauntily crossed on his chest.

"Bless mah heart," Trigger Elvins said in mock friendly tones. "Silent Sam Suffredge has come to mah pahty."

The Silent One did not smile. He surveyed the room casually, but each man felt the whiplash of his wicked eyes. They returned to their scrutiny of Elvins. "What's goin' on here?"

Elvins' voice was molasses sweet and insulting. "A private pahty, Silent Sam, very private. But I reckon we can stand one undersized, donkey-ridin', Yankee-lovin' guest. Come in."

Silent Sam did not wince or jerk. "You're disturbin' my sleep. I won't have no damned spitcan cleaner disturbin' my sleep."

"Youah sleep kin wait, Silent Sam, Ah've got somethin' to tell you," Elvins said as he pushed away from the bar. He stood straddle-legged and mimicked Suffredge's crossed arms and baleful look. "Ah've been sort of out of circulation fo' a few yeahs, and Ah've been watchin' a certain tinhorn tryin' to take over in this heah country wheah Ah left off. This tinhorn, meanin' you, Silent Sam, don't have the propuh style; and besides, Ah hates yore guts to begin with."

With this, Elvins thrust out his voice like a pitchfork into new hay. "Yo'd bettah unhook them ahms and get to shootin' 'cause Ah aims to distuhb yuah sleep puhmanent."

The two dived for their hardware. Each was a right-handed shooter who affected a second gun for balance and vanity and for purposes of raising double hell when drunk.

Trigger Elvins' years with a mop had not dulled his speed. With him the drawing and firing of a gun was as near instinctive as any skill a man can have. He thumbed two shots, one in the shoulder, one in the arm, on the gunside of Silent Sam Suffredge. The victim dropped his unfired gun and bravely went for the clumsier left-side gun. By the time his fingers reached it, its hammer, cylinder and trigger were shattered.

Elvins' gun went back to leather. Suf-

fredge came out of his shooting crouch, with his shattered arm hanging, bleeding, at his side. His face did not show pain—disappointment rather. He looked for a long moment at Elvins. He shrugged his good shoulder then. "Reckon I wasn't good 'nough to take your place, Trigger. Thought I was."

"Reckon not, Sam. So long, Sam," Elvins said.

ELMER Swanson, through all this, had never left his new friend's side. The mellowness was on him complete. He stood in a fine, blue, highly inflammable haze through which the sound and fury of the world did not penetrate. He added his benediction. "Good-bye Sam." He turned to Elvins. "Nice exhibition, mah frien'."

"Thank you, suh," Elvins said, bowing slightly. "Ah reckon even Dancy'll be impressed. Ah'm hankerin' to impress him. Ah think we'd better get on with that pleasin' job of work." Swanson nodded in numb acquiescence but Harvey McDuff reached over the bar and grabbed Elvins' arm.

"Don't do it, Trig! Don't do it!"

Elvins looked down at the clutching hand and then brushed it off. He extracted his wad of bills and peeled off some more. He flung them, as before, and made his parting speech. As he made it, he draped a shiny new cartridge belt and twin holsters on his protege.

"McDuff, see that the boys heah have all they want to drink. Mistuh Beauregahd Swanson and Ah are goin' to Brampton on special business, man business, with a lucky-shootin' half-carpetbagger who happens to be married to mah baby sister."

He singled out the stable man and saddlemaker. "Have you taken care o' mah request?" They nodded anxiously, hoping their choice of horse and saddle would meet Elvins' requirements. They were not nearly so concerned with their probable financial loss as they were with the consequences of Trigger's fury, should he not be satisfied.

McDuff made one more try at stopping Elvins. "Don't do it, Trig! Think of Ella!"

"That's who Ah'm thinkin' of—mah pore defenseless baby sister." He swung Swanson under one arm and strode through the doors. The happy and nearly unconscious salesman of funeral garments and fitments was hoisted into a gleaming new saddle atop a handsome bay mare.

With a flick of the wrist, Elvins adjusted the stirrups and wrapped the free ends of the reins around Swanson's wrists so that he wouldn't lose them. Then he swung aboard his borrowed sorrel and they were off with a shout and a clatter of gun shots.

Harvey McDuff wasted no time. He climbed onto his bar to demand attention. In his hand he held his shorthorn shotgun which he waved for authority. "Where's the marshal? Ike, you go get 'im."

"Hell," Ike said, "Tim's drunk and sleepin' in the hoosegow as per usual. What you so all-fired het up about, Harv?"

McDuff was red in the face with excitement. "Don't you greenhorn tenderfeet know who just left here, and what he's goin' to do?"

Most of them answered no; the rest were too drunk to care.

"That was Trigger Elvins, and he—"

Ike broke in. "That's what he informed us. Right handy with a iron too."

"That's what I mean. He ain't goin' out on no lark like you think; he's out to use that iron on a man, a lawman! We've got to stop 'im."

Another man got interested. "I heerd him mention Dancy. He weren't referrin' to Zeke Dancy, was he?"

"Yeah," McDuff shouted, "that's who. Zeke Dancy's his brother-in-law and he

hates his insides. Dancy trimmed his ears ten years ago and we all thought that was the end of Trigger Elvins' drinkin'-shootin' days. Somethin' happened today—don't know what—to fire 'im up agin. We got to stop 'im. Dancy won't have a chance without warning."

His earnestness sobered some of the crowd and they shouted: "Let's ride out, boys!" Ike said, "We'll catch 'im at the ferry if'n it's on t'other side of the river. C'mon!" In ragged enthusiasm, about ten men burst out of the saloon with McDuff in the lead. They picked the nearest horses.

They plunged out on the east road to Brampton, only half of them armed and those unable to hit a barn from the inside. McDuff had no illusions about any of them being able to shoot it out with Elvins, but he did hope to create a delay or at least arrive in Brampton on Elvins' heels and make enough noise to give Dancy warning.

THE ragged, homemade posse lost several members long before the river. When the remaining five careened down the slope that led to the ferry landing, dusk was falling and they could not see well enough through the willow thickets to tell which side the ferry was on. McDuff made them slow down and keep quiet. He had no stomach for a shoot-out unless they had surprise on their side.

Within thirty yards of the bank McDuff called a halt behind the heaviest growth of willow. He dismounted and ran forward, and then dropped to his stomach, pushing his shotgun ahead of him as he wormed through to get a view. The rest followed suit and were quiet despite their drunken clumsiness. McDuff was the first to break through and see the layout. Ike pulled alongside.

"Look," McDuff said. "They're just pullin' away from our side now. Joe the ferrykeeper is tied and gagged on the bank. Elvins is polin' the boat himself."

"Let's wing 'im while he's in range, Harv," said Ike.

"Sure," said a couple of the others who were fixed where they could see now. McDuff heard them cock their pistols and saddle guns.

"Hold it, you dang fools!" he ordered. "Can't you see him holdin' up the little guy Swanson? The condition you're in you'd more likely hit him or the horses."

"Don't hit them broomtails!" pleaded Mort, the stable owner. "They's the best I got. If I gets 'em back, I wants 'em without lead in their tails."

"What t'hell we gonna do, then?"

"Swim it," McDuff said and by the sound of his voice he didn't relish the dousing in the swift current any more than the others. They returned to their horses and moved upstream so they wouldn't be swept around the bend in crossing. Two of them complained. "Joe and I ain't got guns, Harv. What's the use in us gettin' all wet?"

"Okay, go on home. Let's go Ike, Mort."

On the way over, in the fastest part of the stream, Ike's jaded horse got panicky and turned its nose downstream where the going was easy. Ike cursed and fought the reins but soon he and his horse were out of sight toward the bend. By the time McDuff and Mort climbed the far bank they were ten minutes behind their quarry.

"Our only chance is if the little guy slows up Trig," McDuff said. "We'll push our nags till their hearts drop. We got to make it. Dancy's a fine young man and it'd be a sin if Ella's own brother did 'im in."

Mort set his teeth against the rising nausea in him and pushed on. He was dog-tired and the sedative effect of the liquor was completely gone. He was afraid to open his mouth for comment—his stomach might turn inside out.

As if they hadn't had enough difficulty on their chase, Mort's horse threw a shoe. The panting animal tripped and tossed its load to the trail. McDuff reined up and called back. "We'll ride double."

"Wouldn't have a chance that way, Harv. You go ahead. I'll walk in and pick up the pieces. It's only a mile maybe."

"Wish me luck." McDuff dug his heels in and let his horse have its head. The horse appreciated this and responded by lengthening its lope until the yellow lights of Brampton were in sight.

THIS last call for speed from McDuff broke the pony's heart. It slowed to a walk, shook its head and rolled smooth and easy to the ground, giving its rider plenty of time to get free of the stirrups. McDuff cursed, took a new grip on his shotgun and ran for the cover of a small barn not far from Dancy's house.

If Elvins and Swanson heard this they did not show it. They approached the door between the two lighted windows and knocked sharply on the door.

McDuff did not raise his gun; it would scatter pellets too promiscuously. He crossed his fingers instead, in a boyish wish that Dancy would be alert.

The door opened slowly, soundlessly. The silhouette of a tall, muscled man filled the doorway. McDuff could see the outline of the single gun Dancy always wore, except to bed. A dead silence tore the night with its tension as the two old enemies faced each other.

"Howdy, Dancy," Trigger said.

"What you doin' here, Trig?" Dancy asked.

"Ah heard the news. Ain't Ah welcome?"

"Not with those guns, Trig." Dancy pointed.

"Youah wearin' youahs."

"It's my business to carry a gun."

"'N Ah'd feel right naked without mine. . . . Ellie wrote me a letter."

"She didn't tell me."

"Reckon she didn't," Trigger said. "If what she says is true in thet letter, then you and me's goin' to have wuhds."

"What'd she tell you, Trig?"

"She said you aimed to name a pore defenseless baby critter, *'Zekiel.'* " Elvins' pronunciation of the name was the epitome of disgust.

Zeke Dancy straightened and his right hand went down. "Why not? That handle's been good enough for me for quite a spell."

A smile broke across Trigger's face. "You mean youah proud of it? Why man, that name is what's made you so mean all these yeahs."

A small, sweet female voice came out into the night from behind Dancy. "Why that sounds like Ernest, Zeke. Ah thought you were talkin' to a stranger. Bring him in heah to see his nephy." With that, Dancy broke out in a gusty peal of laughter. "I was just stringin' him, honey. He's so out of practice with those guns I didn't have to be afraid."

Elmer "Beauregard" Swanson made his first sound. He chuckled. "You ain't seen nothing, brother."

"Who's that?" Dancy demanded.

Trigger Elvins put his arm around his friend and pulled him into the house. "This heah's mah fren'. This head man is goin' to be the little critter's godfather. He's goin' to give us the loan of his name so's the boy kin have decent down-south moniker. Tell this vahmint youah name, suh."

Swanson grinned and bowed. "El—, I mean Beauregard E. Swanson, suh, at youah service."

No one in the house paid attention to the strange coughing sound that came from the barn. Dancy figured his new milk cow had choked on dry hay.

MEAT FOR THE MAN-HUNTER

By PHILIP KETCHUM

THE STAGE from Ajo climbed the steep rise from Shale River crossing and then followed the arrow-straight road over Dry Mesa. Nels Glascoe, the driver, whipped up his horses, anxious to make it to the Dry Mesa station before noon and thus win a bet he had made with Will Schaeffer, one of the passengers. Inside the stage, Will Schaeffer glanced at his watch.

"Ten more miles," he remarked. "I might have to pay off if this thing holds together."

Carnahan felt the jerk of the bullet at the sleeve of his coat.

To Joe Carnahan the masked killer gave two choices: A lifetime in the San Dimas pen . . . or six quick bullets in the guts!

"He'll make it," said Sam Hogan. "Nels is a driving fool."

The other two passengers offered no comment. Betty Schaeffer, who sat beside her father, clung to the carriage strap with one hand and braced her feet against the rocking of the stage. Carnahan, next to Sam Hogan, stared bitterly through the open window. This trip out wasn't at all as he had planned it. His right wrist was manacled to Hogan's left. Hogan, who was short, stocky and bald-headed, was the Ajo sheriff.

An almost white, powder-dry dust kicked up by the horses sifted in through the windows and the day was hot. Will Schaeffer had taken off his coat but this was impractical so far as Hogan and Carnahan were concerned. It might have been possible if Carnahan had given his word to make no effort to escape. This, he had stubbornly refused to do. He still challenged the verdict of the Ajo court. He still insisted that he hadn't killed Frank Warnecke.

"I'll get away if I can," he had said to Hogan. "If you get me to San Dimas, I'll break away from there and come back. I'll prove to you someday that you're wrong."

He meant that. He meant every word of it, though how he would get away or how he would prove himself innocent, he didn't know. The case against him had been strong, Hogan was watchful, and men didn't break out of San Dimas.

The stage hit a rough bump, throwing him momentarily against the sheriff and lifting the Schaeffers from their seats. Will Schaeffer screamed a warning to the driver and only half muffled the oath which came to his lips. Carnahan rolled back to his side of the seat, aware that Hogan had momentarily touched his gun. He scowled at Betty Schaeffer. If she hadn't been along he might have risked a struggle following some such bump as this. She was better insurance than Hogan had dreamed.

NELS GLASCOE pulled up at the Dry Mesa stage station a full ten minutes before twelve. He shouted a greeting to Pedro Gonzales and his son who were waiting to take charge of the horses, then swung to the ground, grinning and looking for Will Schaeffer. He was thin, stooped, under-sized. He had a leathery, desert-wrinkled skin. He was well over fifty. Some men said he was past seventy, and too old to drive a stage, but Nels had a way with horses which few men could equal.

"Climb out here an' pay up," he roared. "I want to see the color of your money."

Will Schaeffer swung to the ground, then turned to help his daughter alight. He said, "Keep your shirt on, Nels. Who was driving? You or the Devil?"

Nels chuckled. "Maybe the Devil helped me some at that," he admitted. "He's an old friend of mine."

In the stage, Sam Hogan scowled at Carnahan. "Why go on this way?" he demanded. "Give me your word to ride with me to San Dimas and I'll unlock these cuffs."

"What would my word be worth?" Carnahan asked bitterly.

"I'd take it," said Sam Hogan.

Carnahan shook his head. "No thanks. I'm not going to San Dimas."

The sheriff's lips tightened. He loosened the gun in his holster and then jerked his head toward the door. "All right," he ordered. "Climb down. And climb down carefully. Don't start anything you can't finish."

Carnahan climbed to the ground. He was a tall young man, slender, almost thin. His hair was shaggy. He needed a shave. He glanced from side to side, frowning, and beginning to feel the pressure of time. He would find no help here. In half an hour they would be back on the stage. By dusk they would reach Sawtelle. He would probably be placed in the Sawtelle jail for the night. Half a day's

journey, tomorrow, would take him to San Dimas.

Will Schaeffer, his daughter and Nels Glascoe were heading toward the low, gray adobe building where the noon meal would be served. Nels had collected his money. He was in high spirits, still chuckling. Betty Schaeffer walked between the two men. She was a tall girl, quiet, more than ordinarily attractive. Carnahan had danced with her, once, at a party in Ajo. He wondered if she remembered. If she did, she had shown no sign of it this morning.

"Come on," said Hogan. "Let's go eat."

They started forward, and suddenly, at the far corner of the building, a man appeared. At the same time, a second man showed up at the other corner of the building. Both carried rifles. They covered those who had just arrived on the stage. Schaeffer, his daughter and Nels Glascoe came to an abrupt stop, Nels' chuckle dying a very quick death. Hogan caught his breath. His body went rigid. The main door of the stage station opened and a man stepped out, a man holding a gun in each hand, a man with thin, sharp features and very black hair.

"Stand where you are!" he ordered. "All of you. There will be no trouble unless you ask for it."

"So this was what you planned," said Hogan, grimly.

Carnahan made no answer. He was as surprised as the others. He didn't know these men. He had never before seen them.

"Get their guns, Hondo," said the man in the doorway. "Slim and I will cover for you."

"Jake Brawley," muttered Hogan. "Where did you meet Brawley?"

EVEN that name meant nothing to Carnahan. He shook his head but Hogan was paying no attention to him. One of the men had come forward. He was middle-aged, bearded. He wore a sagging coat, several sizes too large for him, faded blue jeans and an army shirt. He took a gun from Will Schaeffer and another from Nels. He moved on to the spot where Carnahan and the sheriff were standing. He noticed Hogan's badge and an ugly look came into his face. He noticed the handcuffs.

"Hey, Brawley," he called. "These two hombres are cuffed. One wears a star."

Barwley started toward them. He walked with a noticeable limp. He was taller than Carnahan. He had sharp, dark eyes and a tight, thin mouth. An unpleasant smile cracked across it. He said, "Hello, Hogan. Who's your friend? What's he done?"

"Murder," snapped the sheriff.

"Is that all?" said Brawley, and again that brief smile showed on his lips. "Where are the keys?"

"In my pants pocket," said Hogan.

"Hand them over."

Hogan reached for the keys. He held them out. Brawley took them. He unlocked the handcuffs, then stepped back, still holding them. He stared at them, scowling, and suddenly he threw them violently from him.

"That won't help," said Sam Hogan. "One of these days you'll know the feel of them on your wrists. One of these days you'll know the feel of a rope around your throat."

Brawley was still holding one of his guns. He swung toward Hogan, lifting the gun and bringing it down in a slashing blow at the sheriff's head. Hogan ducked too late. His body twisted sideways and dropped to the ground.

Brawley sucked in a quick, sharp breath. He stared at the man who lay at his feet and as quickly as his temper had come, it was gone. He looked up at Carnahan, shrugging his shoulders. "There

are too many men in the world wearing stars," he said. "Who did you kill?"

"No one," said Carnahan flatly.

Brawley gave a dry laugh. "Then let me put it this way. Who do they think you killed?"

"A man named Frank Warnecke."

"Warnecke, huh?" said Brawley. "What do you know? Your name must be Carnahan. Joe Carnahan."

"That's right," Carnahan admitted.

"How do you like it without the cuffs?" asked Brawley.

"I like it," said Carnahan.

Brawley glanced over his shoulder. "Hondo," he ordered, "take the others inside. Let them start eating. Watch them. I'll be in later. Slim, you get a rope an' tie up the sheriff. Maybe I didn't hit him hard enough."

Carnahan looked down at the sheriff. There was a bloody gash in the side of Hogan's skull. Carnahan scowled. He looked up and saw Brawley watching him, an amused expression on his face.

"Well, what's wrong?" Brawley asked. "He was taking you to San Dimas, wasn't he?"

Carnahan nodded but the scowl didn't leave his face.

"Come on over here in the shade," said Brawley. "I want to talk to you."

A LONG porch ran along the front of the building. Against the adobe wall were several benches. Brawley sat on one, leaning back, his long legs stretched out in front of him. There was no coolness here in spite of the shade, and the flies were bad. Brawley kept brushing them away from his face.

"Maybe you wanted to go to San Dimas," said Brawley.

Carnahan shook his head. "I didn't."

"What do you want to do?"

"Go back to Ajo."

"And be arrested or shot down?"

"No. I want to find the man who killed Frank Warnecke. To settle accounts."

A crooked, mocking smile showed momentarily on Brawley's face. "That's right," he said. "You didn't kill him, did you? It was some other fellow."

Carnahan nodded.

"What will you give me for a horse and a chance to go back to Ajo?" Brawley asked suddenly.

"What do you want?" asked Carnahan.

"A little help."

"What kind of help?"

Brawley laced his fingers together then pulled his hands apart and struck at the flies which kept lighting on his face. He was scowling. "There used to be four of us," he said slowly. "Three can handle this job but with four it would be easier. We will have no trouble with Gonzales or his family, but there are the people who came on the stage. We ought to have one man watching them and three here when the stage from Sawtelle arrives."

"So that's it," said Carnahan. "The stage from Sawtelle. Maybe the payroll for the Consolidated mine in Ajo?"

"A good guess," Brawley nodded. "There will be the driver, two guards, and the passengers. How many passengers I don't know. They'll not be expecting any trouble here, but there could be trouble."

"It's due when?"

Brawley pulled a watch from his pocket. He glanced at it. "In less than an hour. It might be here in half an hour. It might have arrived before your stage left. That's why we couldn't stay under cover while your stage was here."

Carnahan took off his hat. He ran his fingers through his hair, then turned and stared toward the east, in the direction from which the Sawtelle stage would arrive. There was as yet no sign of it, no distant dust cloud to mark its approach.

"You have a simple choice to make, Carnahan," said Jake Brawley. "Join us and ride free after we finish the job here, or walk into the dining room and join the

others and continue your trip to San Dimas."

Carnahan scowled. In spite of Brawley's statement, this was no simple choice. He wanted no part of what Brawley planned but neither did he want to ride on to San Dimas. He might talk of escaping from San Dimas, but men didn't escape from that prison. They died there. They died with a rope around their necks, as he would die, or from the bullets of the guards when they tried to escape, or from hunger and illness. Such was the record of San Dimas.

"Give me a gun," he said suddenly.

BRAWLEY gave his short, mirthless laugh. One of his men had come back outside after carrying Sam Hogan into the building and he called this man over.

"Slim," he said, "meet Joe Carnahan. He's going to throw in with us for the afternoon. Carnahan, this is Slim Newhouse."

Slim was tall, gaunt, stooped. He had pale, watery eyes. They measured Carnahan thoughtfully. No show of friendship came into the man's face.

"We don't need him," he said flatly.

"We might," said Brawley. "Hondo will stay inside with the passengers from Ajo. Carnahan will be outside with us."

"What's his cut?"

"No cut. He rides free after we've finished."

Newhouse scratched his jaw. He shook his head. "I still don't like it."

"But that's the way it will be," said Brawley, and there was a sharp tension in his voice. "What's happening inside?"

"Nothing much," said Newhouse. "Hondo made them shell out. What he collected you could stick in your vest pocket."

Again Brawley gave that dry laugh. "Hondo never misses a bet, does he?"

"He's got his eye on the woman," said Newhouse. "He's going to suggest that she ride with us when we leave. Maybe you already guessed that."

"Some day," said Brawley, "a woman will finish him for good. I'll go in and look things over. You stay here with Carnahan. And when that stage from Sawtelle gets in, take McAdams. Not right away. Not until the others are covered and it's safe. Don't miss him, that's all. Here is where we pay him off."

A harsh note had crept into Brawley's voice. He stood up, rubbing his hands together.

"I'll take McAdams," said Newhouse. "I'll not miss."

"Who's McAdams?" asked Carnahan.

"One of the guards who will be on the stage. We owe him something, Carnahan. We take care of what we owe."

A cold shiver ran over Carnahan's body. This was talk of murder. It could be figured no other way. He looked at these two men. Both were eyeing him narrowly. He managed to shrug his shoulders. "A gun, Brawley," he heard himself saying. "I'll need a gun."

"Give him one, Newhouse," said Brawley. "And watch that road. If you see the dust, call me."

NEWHOUSE dug an extra gun from his pocket. He handed it to Carnahan with obvious misgivings. Carnahan took it, examined it. The gun was fully loaded. He tested its balance in his hand, paying no attention to Newhouse. It was good to hold a gun again. The feel of the smooth, cool steel seemed to lend him some of its strength.

"Brawley knew my name," he said abruptly. "How come?"

"We keep in touch with what goes on," Newhouse replied.

Newhouse was watching him closely. Carnahan glanced at him, then looked down the Sawtelle road. There was still no sign of the stage. Brawley had gone inside. Carnahan wondered, vaguely, just

what crowd this was. The sheriff had apparently recognized Brawley's name.

About a month before, some crowd had attempted to hold up the Sawtelle stage the day it carried the Consolidated payroll. One of the outlaws had been shot. The others had escaped. Perhaps these men. And perhaps McAdams was the stage line guard who had blocked that holdup. This was just a guess but Carnahan figured it was a good one.

"When the stage gets in sight," Newhouse was saying, "you'll get back of the building at this end. Stay back of the building until it stops. I'll be back of it, too. I'll signal you when to move around in front. When you reach the front corner, stop. Stand close to the building where you can see the stage.

"When the last passenger has climbed to the ground, we move out and throw down on them. The last ones will be out of the stage before the first ones are in the station. Folks get out of a stage in a hurry. Brawley will run things from the door just as he did when your stage got in. Understand?"

Carnahan nodded.

"And don't make any mistakes," Newhouse added. "I could take care of you as easily as I'll take care of McAdams."

"Let's take a look around back," Carnahan suggested.

He turned that way, walked to the end of the building, and then behind it. There was nothing to see. Far to one side was part of the corral and a corner of the barn. The sun beat down on him from a cloudless sky. There was no breath of wind.

"I'll be at that corner down there," said Newhouse, pointing. "I'll lift my arm when we're to start."

"What if anything goes wrong?"

"Nothing will go wrong," Newhouse grated.

Carnahan drew his gun from his coat pocket where he had placed it. Newhouse stiffened, reaching for his own gun, half drawing it, but Carnahan paid no attention to the man. He drew out the shells, examined them, then replaced them in the gun. He sighted at an imaginary target.

"I'd like a chance to use this once," he muttered. "Guns work differently."

"You may get your chance," said Newhouse.

Carnahan managed a laugh. He started to put the gun back into his pocket. He said, "Let's get out in front and watch for the stage." He took a step that way.

Newhouse relaxed. He nodded. The hand which had been on his gun dropped to his side. He said, "When we get—" And suddenly he broke off. Carnahan had swung toward him. Carnahan's gun was up. It was digging into his ribs.

"Steady!" Carnahan grated. "Don't say a word. Lift your hands above your head."

THE outlaw's eyes had widened. A gray color had come into his face. He gulped in a deep breath. He stood motionless for an instant, then slowly his hands came up.

"That's right," said Carnahan. "Now turn around. Turn slowly. I killed a man, remember? At least, they say I did."

"Brawley will kill you for this," Newhouse said tensely.

"Turn around," Carnahan said again. "We're going to march to the front."

Newhouse turned. Under the prodding of Carnahan's gun he took a step forward, then another.

Carnahan raised his gun. He brought the barrel down smartly against the side of the outlaw's head, just above the ear. A half smothered cry broke from the man's lips. His knees folded. He crumpled to the ground.

Carnahan drew back. He stared down at the man, feeling the sharp drive of a sudden excitement. His breath was coming fast. His muscles were still tense. He was remembering what Newhouse had

said. *"Brawley will kill you for this."* If Brawley walked around the corner of the building right now, that's what would happen.

Carnahan stood perfectly still, straining his ears, listening. He could hear nothing. He stooped over the man who lay at his feet. The outlaw's hat had come off. He was almost bald. There was a long lump above his ear where the barrel of the gun had struck him. Right now he was unconscious. He might remain unconscious for a long time. Or he might not.

Using his belt and neckerchief, Carnahan bound the outlaw's hands and feet. He ripped away a piece of his own shirt and gagged him, then pulled him back of the building. There was no place to hide him, no place at all. The back windows of the rooms at this end of the building were closed and locked. There were no back doors. There was nothing to do but leave Newhouse here. Leave him here and face the inevitable reckoning.

Carnahan took his gun, shoved it into his hip pocket, then straightened. He moved to the front corner of the building. No one was in sight. The stage stood deserted in the yard. Pedro Gonzales had taken away the horses, and presumably acting on Brawley's orders, had not brought out the new teams.

In this way it would look to the arriving stage as though the stage from Ajo had pulled into the station only a few minutes before. Carnahan looked down the road. No distant dust cloud marked the approach of the Sawtelle stage. It had not yet climbed the distant edge of the mesa.

A trickle of perspiration ran down Carnahan's arm-pit. He stood there for a moment, undecided what to do next. He had made no plans. He had acted on impulse in disposing of Newhouse, knowing that he didn't want any part of what the outlaws were going to do.

He had been lucky, but he couldn't count on luck to see him through and he wasn't equipped for what lay ahead. He was a miner, not a lawman. He had used a gun before, but never in defense of his life or against the life of another.

THERE was still no dust cloud on the Sawtelle road. Carnahan moved down along the building. He came to the door through which the others had gone. He opened it and stepped into a small dining room equipped with two tables and benches on either side. Against one wall was a serving table. To one side was a door to the kitchen. It was open. He could hear someone in the kitchen, washing dishes.

In this room, standing against the far wall, was Betty Schaeffer and Nels Glascoe. Will Schaeffer lay face down on the floor, either dead or unconscious. Sam Hogan was sitting up. He was conscious but groggy. Glascoe was thin-lipped, silent. There was no color at all in the girl's cheeks.

Jake Brawley stood at the side of the room, facing these people. His gun was in his hand. He had been talking when Carnahan came in. The man called Hondo was near him, his feet spread wide apart. He had glanced at Carnahan but was now looking at Betty. Carnahan remembered what Newhouse had said about Hondo and his interest in women.

"Stage coming yet?" asked Brawley.

"Not yet," said Carnahan. "Newhouse is watching. What happened to Will Schaeffer?"

"I put him to sleep," said Brawley. "He talked too much."

Betty's body weaved from side to side. She leaned back against the wall, biting her lips. Her hands were tightly clenched. Hogan looked up at him bitterly, as though blaming him for everything that had happened.

"Get outside, Carnahan," Brawley ordered. "Keep watching for the stage.

You, too, Hondo. Send Newhouse in here."

"I thought I got to stay in here," Hondo growled.

"I've changed my mind," said Brawley. "Send Newhouse in."

Carnahan turned back to the door. He stepped outside. He reached into his pocket and his hand closed on his gun. He waited. Far down the Sawtell road was a low cloud of dust. It seemed to be hardly moving. In fact he couldn't even be sure it was the stage. He glanced toward the corral and barn. The horses were there. A saddle horse was there. He should be getting away from here if he was wise.

Hondo came out, grumbling. He hitched up his trousers. He scowled at Carnahan. "Where's Newhouse?" he demanded.

"Around the corner," Carnahan answered.

"Hey, Slim!" Hondo called. "Slim! Come here!"

Carnahan moistened his lips. He stared down the road. The dust cloud had moved nearer but the Sawtelle stage still couldn't be distinguished.

"Slim!" Hondo shouted. "Where are you?"

There was no answer. Carnahan's body was rigid. His hand had tightened on his gun. He leaned back against the adobe wall of the building, but his shoulders barely touched it.

"That's funny," said Hondo slowly. "Where is he?"

"I said he was around the corner of the building," Carnahan answered. "That's where he went."

Hondo's eyes had narrowed suspiciously. His shoulders were hunched. He stood only a pace or two from Carnahan. His breath was coming heavily.

"Where is he?" Hondo asked again.

"How should I know?" said Carnahan. "Why don't you take a look?"

Hondo reached his decision. His hand dropped down to his holstered gun. "You take a look," he ordered. "I'll be right behind you."

He was lifting his gun. Carnahan could see ahead, could see just what would happen. He would walk around the corner of the building with Hondo following him, with a gun at his back. They would come to the place where Slim Newhouse was lying and what had happened would be perfectly clear to anyone. Hondo would waste no time in asking questions after that. He was already suspicious.

Hondo's gun was out, now. It was lifting. Carnahan swung away from the building, pulling his hand from his pocket. He saw Hondo's eyes widen. He heard the man's gasp and then the roar of his gun. A streak of fire stabbed through his side. There was another shot and another—his shots this time—and Hondo was suddenly leaning toward him. The outlaw's mouth sagged open. His eyes seemed to be popping from his head and then he was falling, and one hand, clawlike, reached out and caught at Carnahan's coat, held there for a moment, then pulled away.

CARNAHAN backed off, his eyes now riveted on the door. He heard the muffled sound of Brawley's voice calling Hondo's name, then calling for Slim Newhouse. He came to the corner of the building, this time the corner near the corral and barn, where there were horses. The pain in his side was spreading up and down his body and he could feel the warmth of his own blood gathering against the waistband of his trousers.

Brawley leaned from the door and snapped a shot at him but the shot was high. He fired again. This time Carnahan could feel the jerk of the bullet at the sleeve of his coat. He steadied himself against the building and fired in answer. Brawley pulled back and drew himself out of sight.

The stage from Sawtelle was still far

away. But it was the stage. Carnahan could be sure of that. He stepped around the corner of the building and stood there, looking toward the corral and the barn. It was thirty yards to the barn. He wondered if he could make it; then he realized, abruptly, that there was no point in reaching the barn and climbing a horse and riding somewhere to bleed to death. Any chance of his escape had been stopped by Hondo's bullet.

He heard a sound from the back of the building, the sound of a step. He stood rigid, waiting. Brawley had to reach the barn, too. Brawley had to reach it if he was to get a horse and get away before the Sawtelle stage arrived.

"Carnahan!" called a voice. "Carnahan! Are you there?"

"I'm here, Brawley."

"I made a mistake about you," said Brawley. "Or maybe it was a mistake to leave you with Slim Newhouse. Did he tell you?"

Carnahan frowned. He tried to make sense out of that question, but couldn't. His legs were growing numb. His mind was clouding. He sagged against the wall, slid to the ground.

"Here I come, Carnahan," said Brawley.

Carnahan held his gun with both hands. He waited, watching the corner of the building, fighting against an almost overpowering dizziness. A minute passed and another and still Brawley didn't appear. Then from behind him he heard the sound of Brawley's voice and he knew, even as he turned, that Brawley had circled the building and had fooled him.

He saw the man, saw his leveled gun and the cruel, tight face above it, the lips twisted in an ugly, triumphant sneer. He heard the roar of a shot and he fired and he saw Brawley turning and limping toward the corral at a half run.

And suddenly the man seemed to stumble and fall and then get to his knees and go down again. Whether or not he got up after that, Carnahan didn't know. The dizziness he had been fighting off would be fought off no longer. His head dropped forward against his chest. His gun slid from his hands.

WADE McAdams paced back and forth across the dining room of the Dry Mesa station. He was scowling, shaking his head. "It's not right, I tell you," he declared. "It's not right. This fellow Carnahan shoots it out with one of the toughest crowds in the West. He knocks one cold and ties him up. He kills the other two. And you tell me you're going to take him to San Dimas to be hung. It's not right, I tell you."

Will Schaeffer came in from the next room, accompanied by Nels Glascoe and several men who had been on the Sawtelle stage. He held a knife in his hands. "Look what we found on Hondo," he reported, holding up the knife. "This belonged to Frank Warnecke. It was missing from his body when he was found. I know this knife. So does Nels Glascoe. Warnecke had a wad of money on him the night he was killed. I'd be willing to bet that Hondo or Brawley killed Frank Warnecke for his money. Let's talk to Newhouse."

Hogan went with them to talk to Newhouse, and from Newhouse, these men were to get the true story of the death of Frank Warnecke, a story which would free Carnahan.

Of course Carnahan didn't know this. He opened his eyes to look up into the face of Betty Schaeffer. She was smiling. She was bending over him.

"I didn't know San Dimas could be like this," said Carnahan. "I think I'm going to like it."

His voice was low, thick and feverish, but he was still able to manage a grin.

By
GIFF CHESHIRE

In the same split second, one of the Quarrings fired.

HOT IRON— COLD GRAVE!

"A near miss with a bullet can brand a man coward, but it takes a slug square in the guts to prove him brave! Come out of that shack and prove me, gents!"

PRINCE JOPLIN drove the oxen through the gate into the neat yard around the frame house. It was a big, impressive structure, the best on Evans Creek, one of the few that had not been hewn directly from the forest. Prince knew he made a shameful picture, both in his ragged appearance and in his crawling intentions. He couldn't help that. He was willing to do anything—anything at all.

He thought: The next time you'll be coming to him for grub, or the money to buy it. He'll laugh at you, like he's going to laugh now.

Yet he remembered Faith's broken words in the still of the night when he had wakened to find her crying softly against her pillow: "I'm ashamed, Prince, but I can't help it. I guess you'd just call it homesick."

Turk's big hound came suspiciously from the grape arbor. The tension went out of it then, and it trotted over and stretched its neck eagerly as Prince bent to pat its glossy head. Prince stood still beside his wagon, heat climbing into his cheeks. But it was worth a try, and Turk could do no more than turn him down.

He put the oxen on into the shade of the maples, leaned the ox-goad thoughtfully against the wagon, and went up the path to the porch. He didn't walk like a homesteader, a husband, a man who had almost become a father. He was glad for once that Ace Joplin wasn't on hand, and couldn't know about this, that his father was dead and out of it all.

Prince was a thin, slow man, honed now to a raw and irritable edge by months of trouble. He was anxious to get the thing over, one way or another. Yet he paused a moment and thought of Ace, dead by a Quarring bullet—but who could prove that? Everyone had liked Ace and admired him, for he had been one of the early settlers when the Indians were contesting every foot of this country. He had been an outstanding figure in the Indian wars that followed.

Halting on the porch, Prince remembered how many times he had come here with his father when Ace and Turk were cronies, and how many times, later, when he had been courting Faith against old Turk's will. He knew if it were Ace now, instead of him, he would walk through that door and take what he wanted.

Prince Joplin hitched his belt and squared his shoulders. He opened the door and stepped into the big hallway, gloomy and dusty now that Turk batched it with a hired hand. Prince kept his shoulders back, a glint of bitter pride in his eyes. Once the people around here had declared him the spitting image of Ace. Now a good many had changed their minds.

Prince went on through to the kitchen before he found Turk, who was eating his noon meal and talking to his hired man. They must have heard him come in, but nobody ever knocked or waited for an invitation in this country, and old Turk had a lot of company. Prince remembered his popularity, trying to be fair to the man who was his father-in-law.

The hired man stared and said, "Well howdy, Prince," and went on eating. Turk Grandy's glacial gray eyes stared straight at Prince and didn't see him at all. But his mouth lined hard and straight above his blocky chin. He gave no greeting.

Softly Prince said, "Want to talk to you, Turk, when you're done eating." He walked past the table and took a chair by the kitchen door. Prince was waiting for the hired hand to get through eating and go, and though the man knew it, he didn't hurry at all. Well, the fellow had a right to eat.

ON THE wall between the big range and back window, Turk's gun nestled in its holster, the belt looped over a peg. The gun was the one he had killed Jonas Quarring with—a job he had felt to be the duty of Ace Joplin's son. He still felt it, bitterly.

Prince knew Turk was thinking of that gun, too, and of that occasion, and of all the sorry things that had happened since. There had been a strong bond between Turk and Ace, both crossing in the same emigration and settling on the same creek bottom. They'd fought Indians together, and got started as back country ranchers.

But Turk had been the one with the money-making touch. Ace Joplin liked to laugh, to fight, to hunt and fish, to ride miles to the settlement get-togethers, and

had never managed to get ahead far.

Prince Joplin had made out even worse than Ace, when it had all been transferred to his shoulders. He was a lot like his father, everyone said, and yet a sad contrast, for he lacked what had made Ace so winning, the do-or-die guts, the come-what-may serenity. Prince knew that. The awareness had always made him wince. He guessed Faith had been the only one in the country who had seen anything else in him.

Prince Joplin's thoughts went back three years. They had expected trouble after Ace had whipped Jonas Quarry for knocking down a worm fence. The Quarrings, sire and two burly, overbearing sons, had made bad neighbors from the start. Prince had been with Ace, riding to a dance at Vannoy's Ferry, when the thing turned deadly. The bullet came out of the brush and knocked Ace out of the saddle, piercing his head. Prince remembered his own horrified reaction: He can't be dead—he can't.

But Ace was. It had roused the countryside, but nothing could be proved. It had been one of those things. Everyone knew it had been a Quarring, but the Quarring brothers simply denied it. And that was that.

The most vivid thing about it now was what old Turk Grandy had said, when the law had come to a dead halt on the case. "You know who done it, boy. You know what to do about it." But it had been Turk who finally had gone up to the Quarring claim. He had taken a slug in the leg getting away from the boys after he had killed Jonas Quarring. And that was when he had put a heavy foot down on Prince's coming over to see Faith.

"No yellow-belly's going to marry my girl, Prince Joplin."

"That's her say, Turk. I'll marry her whenever she's willing. I'll kill no man on my own suspicions when the law can't prove a thing. I told you that. Ace made friends. But a man of his cut makes enemies, too. It could have been anybody."

"You know damn well it was a Quarring. But don't let it trouble you now. I took care of it. Ace Joplin and me was close."

"You'll get a bullet out of the brush yourself for that," Prince said.

Turk scowled. "That's what scared you out. It don't scare me."

Prince could still remember how it had felt hearing that. He didn't say the thing that really lay in his heart. He had always known that while he resembled his father in body, he was much more like his dead mother. He didn't tell Turk the things she had taught him about how men ought to get along with each other. She hadn't held to revenge, and neither did Prince Joplin.

Oddly, the two Quarring boys had let it ride as it was, as had the law, which the country took to mean an acknowledgment of guilt by the boys, punished man-to-man in frontier fashion, with the Quarrings not caring to stir it up again. Prince wasn't going to tell Turk that they had started making trouble for him at last and that they had been for months. That was Prince's own business, though it might explain to Turk why he had had so hard a time making a go of it, losing steers and sheep, with fences being knocked down again so that strays and even deer out of the woods got in and tramped his young grain.

THE hired man drained his coffee cup, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and went out, casting Prince a glance of curiosity. Old Turk stayed at the table. He held his head up proudly and arrogantly, and at last he looked at Prince.

"Well, what're you doing here?"

It was the first time Prince had been over since Faith married him and moved

out to the cabin. Turk had never been up there to see her. Yet Prince knew the estrangement grieved the old man. "When you get tired of it, come back," Turk had told his daughter. "You'll know nothing but hard times, which is all a yellow-belly can give a woman."

Right now Prince would rather take a slug in his belly than do what he had to do. But he knew beyond question that Faith grieved about it as much as Turk did. The two had always been close. Turk was always prosperous, and he had given her everything she could ever think of a girl might want. What she had now made a contrast that was pitiful. And with her sick, those things all meant a lot more.

"Come over to get Faith's bedroom furniture, Turk. She wants it. You gave it to her with no strings. And she's got a right to it." He made a kind of prayer: Don't let me tell him how sick she's been. He'd call it homesickness, and he'd be partly right. I can't tell him about her losing her baby because she had too much hard work for an expecting woman; that some of her old things might make her feel more to home.

Turk Grandy shoved back his chair. He said, "You make a big point out of right. It never seems to enter your head she's got a right to more than what you'll ever give her. She send you for it?"

"No," Prince said. "And she's got a right to more than I been giving her, Turk. You're right about that. But she's also entitled to her own judgment, as she was when she married me. As long as she's satisfied, I'll let it go at that. You going to let me take her furniture?"

"Not this side of Doomsday. And the sooner you git, the better." Turk didn't even ask about his daughter's health. As long as he didn't, Prince didn't mean to say anything. "You're a sorry sight of a man, Prince Joplin, begging me for the things you can't give a wife. She'll quit you in time, and I can wait."

Prince's cheeks turned stiff. He got up from the chair and looked a good inch taller. He said, "She's no more a quitter than you are. All the fancy things she left here, all you could buy her, won't bring her back here again."

"I ain't so sure," Turk said. "Never called her a quitter. But she's no more fool than me, either. Reckon she'll sour just as bad on the son of Ace Joplin when she really sees what speciman he is."

Prince stood silent, his gray eyes staring at Turk Grandy. "All right, Turk. We'll see. She's free to come home any time she wants. If I see so much as a sign, I'll send her."

PRINCE drove back up the creek to his claim. By the time he drew in sight of the rough log cabin that was their home he had made up his mind. He unyoked the oxen and turned them into the lot behind the pole barn. When he came into the cabin, Faith was in by the fire, busy.

She smiled and he saw the over-brightness in it. He knew she was upset and ashamed of having been caught crying in the night. She had the same stout heart she always had. It was only that a woman who had carried a baby for three months and then lost it would be moody, uneasy and—well, homesick for what she had given up for a man.

"Where'd you go with the wagon?" Faith asked.

Prince hated a lie, yet he said, casually, "There's a patch of road, down a piece, I been aiming to fix before winter." He smiled at her, saw her accept it, and eased, thinking: No wonder she's down in her mind. What did I bring her to, anyhow? A dog-trot cabin, with only a few pieces of something supposed to be furniture that Ace and me made. No curtains even. And none yet. A fireplace to cook in, and she was used to a stove. She ain't had a thing new since she came here.

He said, "You ought to rest. I'll get

supper. You sit down and don't get up."

"Why, I'm fine, Prince. Just fine."

He knew then she would never quit him, as Turk Grandy hoped and even expected. Turk didn't know of the things that had passed between them, of the fierce, fine, hungry things they had said. And these memories and this fidelity set the decision deeper in Prince Joplin.

He went on into the bedroom. An old wooden crate stood against the bare wall next to their bed, which was only four legs, a crosshatching of rope, and a straw tick under some patched quilts Faith had brought with her. Prince took a smaller box from the rough commode and opened it.

He stared at his father's gold watch and single-action revolver. Both were of the best quality, and he knew they would be good for a dicker in Tool's big store in Jacksonville. He had hated to part with them, all he had left of Ace, hated it so badly he had gone over to ask Turk for some of the things he knew Faith hungered for.

But watch and gun wouldn't be enough to buy a decent household equipment. The difference would have to be made up by the five steers he had planned to sell in late fall for winter expenses. They were in good shape. The Jacksonville butcher would be glad to buy them any time.

Prince Joplin went out before supper to drive the steers down from the hill pasture. They were gentle enough that he could string them together to lead behind the wagon, and he would get an early start for the hard, day-long trip to the mining camp. He climbed the slope and went over the ridge to the high pasture. He had crossed the pasture without locating his steers when he came to the destroyed section of worm fence.

HE HALTED, staring at it a moment. The fence had been destroyed deliberately and used for a fire where somebody had camped or heated a meal or done some branding. The same sweeping inspection showed him the steers had gone through onto the next section, which was the Quarring claim.

Their tracks were plain, and Prince had followed them on over the high ridge before he was certain. They had not strayed but had been driven. His mouth ruled flat, and he went on doggedly, coming at last to the rough, ramshackle barn and cabin. Something troubled him, a sort of warning beating at the back of his mind, and he wished he had strapped on Ace's gun.

He saw his steers in the barn lot before the Quarring boys emerged from the cabin. He realized that they had been watching for him to appear, for both carried their old flintlocks and both regarded him with half-amused, evasive eyes.

"If you're looking for your strays," Rafe said, "we penned 'em up. You can have 'em when you pay the damages they done to our vegetable patch. We figure thirty dollars."

The boys were huge, unshaven, with eyes set too close together above big bent noses. But they had cunning and the kind of guts a mountain man needed, and it was claimed either one could drop a steer with his fist. Prince Joplin's glance shuttled from the captured animals to the measly, weed-choked garden patch on the opposite side of the cabin. It was absurd, a bald taunt, and they probably had their reasons for it.

He looked at Rafe again, his eyes steady, his body motionless. "That's two-thirds of what they'd bring on the market, Rafe. Ten gardens like that one wouldn't be worth that. And if they were in it, you drove them across when you knocked down my fence and brought them through."

"Trying to make a squabble, Joplin?"

"Trying to get my steers back."

"You can have 'em when you pay the

damages," Rafe said. They were armed, they stood apart, and they watched him guardedly.

Prince Joplin turned his back squarely upon them and started back over the ridge.

He waited until morning because he wanted good light. In the dirty gray of dawn he slipped out of bed without waking Faith, dressed and strapped on Ace Joplin's gun. He had no saddle horse, and it made a long walk, but he took the trouble to go by Turk Grandy's.

An early riser, Turk was up and fixing breakfast when Prince stepped directly into the kitchen. The old man concealed his surprise, but suspicion stood on his face as he glanced down at Ace's gun. His eyes darted to his own on the wall.

"I didn't come gunning, Turk," Prince said. "Thought I ought to tell you Faith's sick. Been so quite a spell. She lost her baby. You ought to go see her, Turk. Today."

Turk Grandy pulled himself up, a dark passion running under the deep pigment of his skin. His glacial eyes slowly changed into a seering flame.

"Why, damn you to hell for keeping that from me! I'll see her, all right. And I'll bring her home."

"If she wants to come, Turk," Prince said. Then softly he added, "If she needs to." He walked out, taking a short cut over the hills.

He knew he was covered from the time he topped the ridge and started down toward the Quarring cabin. He could see his five steers still in the pen, unfed, and he knew they had been losing weight ever since they had been there. Neither of the brothers emerged from the cabin this time, and Prince strode up to the door.

He had to get them in front of him to do what he had to do. He pushed the door open.

A voice said, "Stop right there, Joplin. I see you come heeled. You can toss in that big piece of hardware right now."

PRINCE kept his arms down, disobeying the order, and stepped inside. There was no shot. He saw that the Quarring boys were only half dressed, their boots and breeches pulled on over the dirty underwear in which they had slept. Rafe stood by the clay fireplace, his rifle in his hand, swung down by his hip but not lined.

Bing Quarring had crossed over to a place beside the door, also with a rifle, so that they had his attention spread. It was a wariness instinctive to their breed.

Prince Joplin made his calculations, considering their two rifles which gave them a couple of quick shots without recharging. Against his single-action revolver—Ace's gun. He had weighed this beforehand, knowing that they were never willingly separated from their long-barreled flintlocks. Prince pulled in a long breath. Ace Joplin would never have flinched at such odds.

Prince had measured the room, noting the table against the wall, by the end window that was covered with scraped deerskin. There were three or four chairs, clumsy and rough, three built-in bunks, and an unsightly litter over all. He was as close to the table as they were, and he had to get closer. To do it, he had to occupy their stupid but dangerous minds.

"You know I don't have thirty dollars, Rafe," Prince said. "You Quarrings have got fox brains in your heads. What're you aiming at this time?"

Rafe considered that a compliment, and grinned. "You might as well know, since you fell for it. We wanted you to come with your gun, Prince Joplin. We wanted to make you show fight, hard as that is. But we figured you would, rather than have your pretty bride starve through the winter. That's why we took your cows."

"I come with a gun on," Prince said. "So what?"

"So we're going to kill you, because we can say you come at us with a gun over a steer squabble. It's been touchy after the way this country started sniffing in our direction when Ace Joplin got himself killed. But nobody lays fist or gun on a Quarring without paying for it."

"So you admit to killing Ace," Prince said, and his voice had the drip of ice-water. "Well, I knew it, as everyone did."

"And who could do anything about it, except old Turk Grandy? Well, he killed our pap, and it wasn't pap who shot Ace Joplin." Rafe's lower lip pouted, as though he considered it a grave injustice that the wrong skunk had been extracted from the den, and his eyes told Prince this was the guilty one.

"Where does Turk come into it?" Prince asked.

"If you get your'n, Turk'll come again. This time we'll get him."

Prince grinned, but his cheeks were stiff and unresponsive. "Turk Grandy hates my guts."

Rafe Quarring's eyes grew brighter with cunning. "Turk won't give a damn about you. But he'll get to thinking somebody's killed his girl's man. That'll fetch him. That'll make it personal to that old warthog. His pride'll get him, and it'll bring him here. Only this time we'll be set, and he'll of come gunning for us, same as you have."

Prince Joplin couldn't help swallowing, seeing ahead to a time when Faith might be all alone. He thought: I can still back out. I can tell them to keep the steers. Maybe they wouldn't have the guts to kill me if I refuse to show fight.

But he held himself straight, and it was almost as if Ace Joplin stood at his shoulder. This would be the time when Ace would put a hand toward his gun. Swinging toward the table, tipping it, getting behind.

Prince Joplin reached no decision, for action was already stirring in him. Both Quarrings held rifles but hadn't lined them, sure they could kill him at the first hostile move. Prince drove for the table, hit it and sent it crashing over, its filthy litter cascading against wall and floor. It fell the way he wanted, even as his hand brought up Ace's gun. And in that same split second one of the Quarrings fired.

The slug knocked Prince flat, but he held onto his gun, seeing instantly that Rafe had shot because the man now frantically reached for his powder horn. Prince swung the revolver to the other target and let it blast just as Bing Quarring pulled the trigger.

Sound crashed in the cabin's small space; powder smoke ribboned on the quivering air. Prince eared back the hammer of the gun even as he watched Bing go back against the wall, stand there a second with his head thrown roughly back, then slide into a sit on the puncheon floor. Motionless. Staring.

SIMULTANEOUSLY, Rafe shoved himself across the opposite corner into a niche beside the fireplace. He was driving determined, skilled fingers through the process of recharging his rifle, a matter of seconds for a man like that. Precious seconds for Prince Joplin. Prince tried to turn himself around and couldn't move.

He knew he was stunned, hard hit, reflex having carried him through the first shot. It was telling now. Everything in his vision turned a deep brown color. Single objects split apart and became matched pairs dancing in his sight. As if an enormous gravity reached out for his head, it sagged toward the floor.

He could hear the sound of Rafe's hasty movement. Bing didn't stir from his grotesque sitting position against the wall. Prince thought: Ace, Ace, you could of taken it.

And as if by a miracle, his sight began to clear. The revolver was cocked, and he

secured his grip upon it. Rafe was still pressed back in his niche, completely cut off. One of them would have to move out to make the next action. The one who did it would have the advantage of momentum to lend him speed. And Prince Joplin wanted this advantage for Faith's sake.

He got to his knees, growing steadier, and realized he was hit in the side. He placed his left hand on a leg of the overturned table and drew on to a stand. By now Rafe would be reloaded and ready. Prince shoved out into the room, praying his legs would stay under him. His gun was lined and found its target and he shot.

Rafe Quarring's flintlock, lined from his hip, didn't even go off. Rafe stared for an instant, then fell with a crash.

Prince gathered their rifles and threw them out into the grass-grown yard, following, not caring if they were alive or dead. He got as far as the corral gate and there had to halt. He stood there a long time with his arms on the top pole, head resting upon them, sickness racking him. The anaesthesia that clamped his side and across his back and belly was wearing away. Then he let down the pole gate, staggered into the corral, and started his steers homeward.

Prince saw Turk Grandy's saddle horse standing before the cabin as he came down the last slope in slow agony, his steers moving obediently ahead of him. Taking no more chances, Prince got them into his own milking corral. Then he went up to the cabin. He was giddy and beyond thinking now or he would have remembered that his bloody shirt and trousers would be a shock to Faith.

He crossed the porch, shoved open the door, and stood framed there. Faith and old Turk were at the table, over coffee, and he saw from the eased happiness in both that they had patched up their quarrel. Prince didn't know how it had come about, but he was glad of it.

It was Turk who detected the bloody mess on Prince's side, and he gasped, "Good God, boy, what've you been up to?"

"The Quarring boys took my steers," Prince said. "I brought 'em back."

For a long moment old Turk stared at him. Then he said, "If you got 'em back, they're dead."

"Don't know," Prince said.

"Boy, you've got me stumped. You wouldn't do it for your daddy. You done it for five measly steers."

"Not so measly," Prince managed to say. "I won't step over my rights, Turk. But I'll stand up for 'em."

Faith came toward him, and he saw her grow strong before his eyes—now that his need of her was greater than her need of him. He saw the sadness that had been about her eyes for weeks leave. She said, "Come and lie down, darling, and let me take care of you."

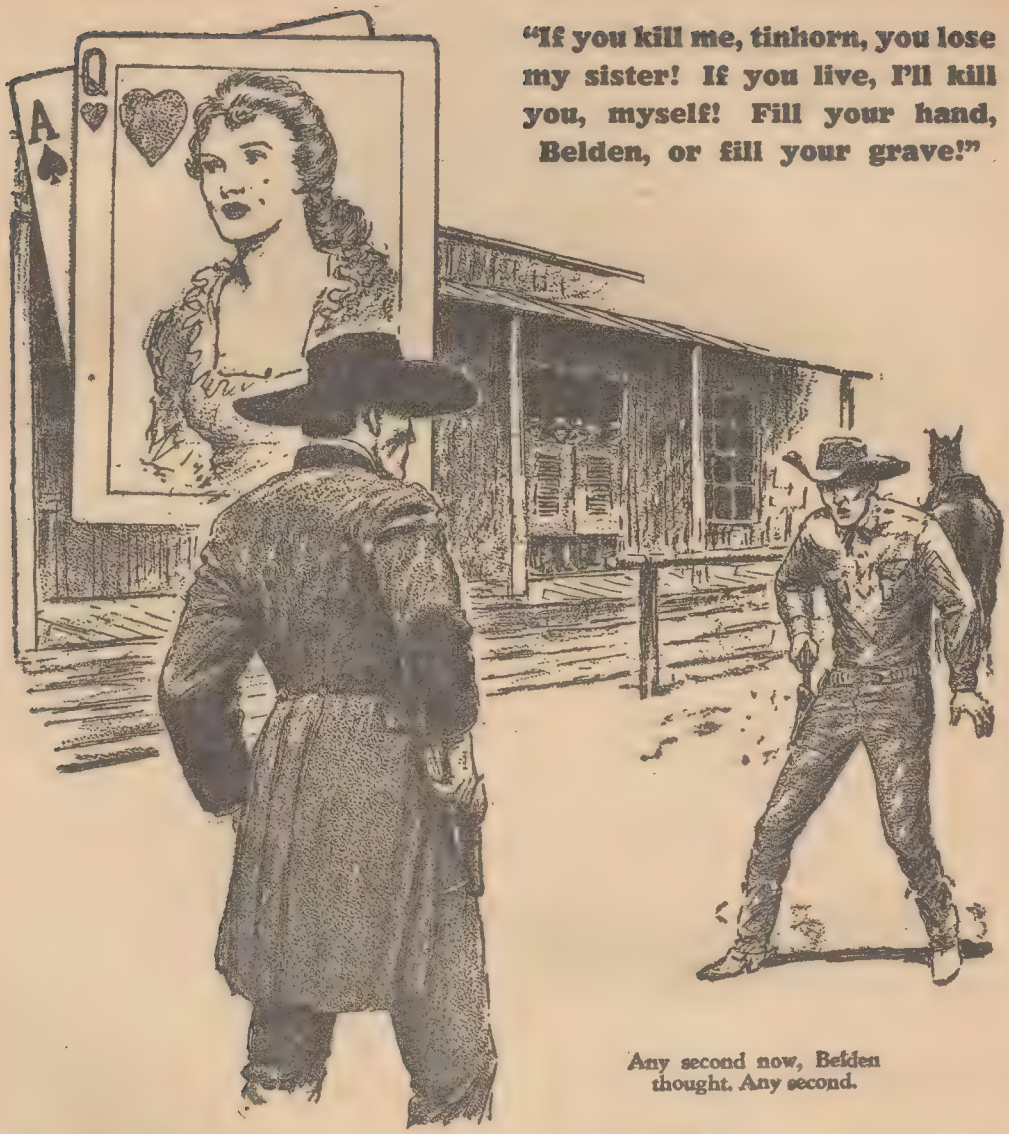
Prince got to their bedroom by himself, then he pitched face down across the bed.

It was Turk Grandy who made the hard, fast ride to Jacksonville to bring out the doctor. He never left Prince's claim until the medico had made his examination and done his work and rendered an opinion: "Not too good, and not too bad. Rest'll do it. That and a tough constitution."

"He's got the one, and he'll get the other," Turk said. Later, before he would go home to tend to the work he had let slide, he said, "I been an awful fool, Prince. It's harder for a man to run himself by principles than by his feelings. I'm old enough I ought to know that. Wish you'd let me ease things along for you till you're back on your feet."

Prince stared at him. "We don't need any help, Turk. We'll get along."

Turk was thoughtful for a moment before he grinned. "Reckon you don't, son. And I reckon you will."



"If you kill me, tinhorn, you lose my sister! If you live, I'll kill you, myself! Fill your hand, Belden, or fill your grave!"

Any second now, Belden thought. Any second.

Quick—or Dead?

CORT BELDEN sat in the Encinada Saloon, idly watching the tiny lights reflected in the amber fluid of the whiskey sitting untasted on the table before him. The drink was untasted because today he was going to kill a man, and he didn't want to drink until it was over.

And then, he knew, he would get drunk, washing the bitter knowledge of death from his brain and easing the hard knot in his stomach with liquor.

By JIM LONG

But not now. He never drank when he knew he would be facing a man over smoking guns before the sunset. It was one reason why he was still alive. That and his deadly, striking speed with his Colt.

Soon it would be noon, and he would get up and go out into the hard, brilliant sunlight, to walk down the street, his boot heels kicking up little puffs of smoky dust behind him. And at the other end of the street there would be another man, his boots scuffing up tiny whorls of the dry dust as he walked toward Cort.

Cort almost permitted himself a smile. Little puffs of dust, and in a hot, blasting thirty seconds one of the two men would drop to the ground, dead. Dust into dust. Dust ye are and to dust ye shall return.

One of the men. Cort Belden or Tom Harty. Belden or Harty. Which would it be?

He did smile then. There was no doubt whatever in his mind of the outcome. It would be Tom Harty. Youthful, fiery, impatient Tom Harty, who had never fired a gun in anger in his life. Tom Harty, who had furiously ordered Belden, the gambler and killer with three notches, to leave town by noon.

Tom Harty, Diane's brother. Foolish, brave Tom Harty. Brave because he had the guts to tell Belden off, foolish because he would try to back his play, and he didn't stand a chance against Belden's blinding speed.

"Be out of town by noon, Belden," he had said, "or I'll shoot you on sight. Leave town or die!"

Diane's brother. Diane of the auburn hair and the soft gray eyes. Diane of the lithe, long-legged body. Diane, the girl Belden loved and wanted more than anything he ever wanted before in his life.

The gambler frowned, and his slim, white fingers drummed a nervous tattoo on the old table before him, until he forced himself to stop. Diane complicated matters. That she loved him, he knew; that she also loved her brother was an inescapable fact. And now her sweetheart and her brother would face each other over flaming guns. One must die.

Idly, Belden cut the fresh pack of cards lying before him, and smiled grimly as he turned up the ace of spades. An omen of the sudden, strangling, sobbing death that would come soon to Harty on the dusty street outside.

And all because of Diane, in a way. Harty had been furious when he discovered his sister in the arms of the gambler. Belden, the gambler and killer, in love with his sister, and worse yet, his sister in love with Belden.

It was then he had issued the ultimatum. *Leave town or die.*

FUNNY that Harty should have been the last man in Encinada to know of the love of his sister and Belden. Everyone knew about it, and oddly enough most of the men did not disapprove. Belden was a square gambler, feared, perhaps, but respected and even admired. More than one man had been forced to withdraw from Belden's games because the cold-eyed dealer felt the townsman had lost enough. More than one cowpuncher had been staked by Belden until he found a job riding. Every man knew that any game Belden dealt was on the level.

The women of the town, of course, seemed against it. But Belden, who understood women as well as he understood a poker opponent, knew that the solid and respectable townswomen secretly envied Diane and wished them well.

Leave town or Die.

The words formed a refrain in Belden's mind and marched through, over and over, until he forced himself to stop thinking of them. A thin film of sweat appeared on his brow, but he didn't wipe it off. It could have been the heat of the summer day.

Why did it have to be young Harty?

Why did it have to be Diane's brother?

Leaving town, oddly enough, was a thought that had never occurred to Belden. He knew instinctively, without reasoning the matter out, that he could never leave town. Once the word got around that Cort Belden had been faced down by a fuzzy-cheeked boy, he would never be able to raise his head again. Callow punchers would hooraw him across green baize tables the length and breadth of the cattle country. Fellow gamblers would ignore him, bartenders would sneer at him, drunks would draw on him.

Diane hadn't been able to understand that. "Please go, Cort," she had begged. "Please go now, before there is blood on your gun—my brother's blood. Don't kill Tom! Be the bigger man. Go, and take me with you! We can build a new life together somewhere, but we couldn't if you kill Tom, you know that. I couldn't marry my brother's killer."

He had been shaken, but had disengaged her clinging hands. She didn't understand. He had to face her brother. There was nothing else he could do. He had to face Harty, and when he faced him, Harty would die.

Belden held his finger out straight before him. They were as steady as though carved from granite, and they would remain steady. But there was a turmoil in his soul that Belden never thought he would feel.

Why did it have to be Harty? Why did it have to be Diane's brother?

There was always the chance he could maim the boy, or grandstand it and shoot the gun out of his hand. Belden knew that was a thousand-to-one shot. Roaring .45's spitting lead at twenty paces left no time for cautious aiming. Slap leather and start shooting. That was the way it had to be.

Harty would die, and Cort would never hold slim and lovely Diane in his arms again. It would be all over. Cort sighed deeply. There was a wild streak in Diane, too, that matched his own perfectly. They had instinctively felt they belonged to each other the moment they had met. It would have been a happy marriage.

It came to Cort then that life without Diane wouldn't be very interesting anymore. No matter how this thing turned out, Diane was lost to him forever.

Belden gestured impatiently, annoyed with the trend of his thoughts, and his sweeping hand knocked the whiskey to the floor. The crash of the glass startled him, and he realized the saloon was deathly still and quiet, every man's eye on him.

Diane, lovely Diane, the Diane that meant more to him than anything in the world. How could he keep from hurting her? How?

Belden closed his eyes wearily and leaned back in his chair. His decision seemed clear. He had to stay in Encinada. He had to face Harty. If he faced him, Harty would die.

Forcing the matter from his mind, he drew his gun and checked it, gently rubbing the shining blue steel, polishing the walnut butt with his hand. Idly he twirled the cylinder, looking at the bright brass cartridges. He twirled it again, and the thought struck him that the spinning cylinder was like a roulette wheel, a grim wheel of chance, with death on the table betting against life. The comparison amused him and he smiled, watching the spinning cylinder.

Suddenly he knew what he would do. He didn't even pause to consider, or reason, as the thought flashed into his mind. He even smiled grimly. Belden, the gambler, would be dealing his last hand. Silently and swiftly he opened the gun, and his slim fingers reached for bright, yellow brass.

IT WAS noon. Belden sighed, and spun the cylinder of the heavy Colt before easing it into the holster, settling it gently

so it would slide out with lightning speed. He rose, then, and hitched the holster at the proper height, touching his hand to the butt of the gun to be sure. He tied the holster down on his lean, hard thigh, so it wouldn't drag as he drew. He settled his flat-crowned black hat firmly on his head and stepped out into the sunlight.

It was as he knew it would be. The hard, brilliant light, and the little puffs of dust kicked up by his boots as he walked down the street. The board sidewalks were deserted, but he knew there were faces watching, curious faces, frightened faces, all watching from behind the shuttered windows and the closed doors.

Watching the grim and deadly drama unfold on the stage before them as the two men Diane loved most in the world met over flaming guns.

At the other end of the street there was movement, and Harty stepped into view. He began walking toward Belden and the gambler smiled briefly, the expression flickering across his face. He was too far away but he knew how Harty would look. His face would be grim, and his mouth would be set in a determined line. And he would be frightened. There would be sweat darkening his shirt, and his hair would lie plastered to his forehead under his hat. Yes, he would be frightened, but he would walk on, facing certain death. He could do no less.

The two men were closer now, and Belden's eyes shifted to Harty's right hand, wary, watchful. His mind closed to every thought except that hand, waiting, alert and ready, for that hand to curl, and grasp, and pull.

Closer still they were, and they continued to walk on. Three feet closer at every step. Forty feet, thirty feet, twenty-five feet. Belden's eyes narrowed. Harty had plenty of guts.

And then it happened. With a strangled, sobbing curse Harty slapped his hand to his holster and dragged his gun out, frantically, furiously. Belden smiled then, broadly. It was so slow. So slow.

There was only one shot. It boomed loudly and alone in the hot summer stillness and a cloud of smoke rolled over the ground.

Two men. Two guns. One shot, and one of the men slumped, slipped down, struggling to stand upright, to raise his gun, struggling against blackness and perpetual oblivion. Struggled and lost, and crashed heavily into the dry street.

Dust flew up in little clouds from under the fallen body. The dead man's feet jerked once, convulsively, and little puffs of smoky dust rolled out from the boots.

THERE was a buzz of voices, excited voices, and people were running into the street. Tom Harty stared open-mouthed, unable to believe that he was still alive and that it was Belden who had died, collapsing in the dust. He stared stupidly at the gun in his hand and at Belden's body. His knees buckled and he sagged slightly as the shock came, and he quivered violently with a sudden chill.

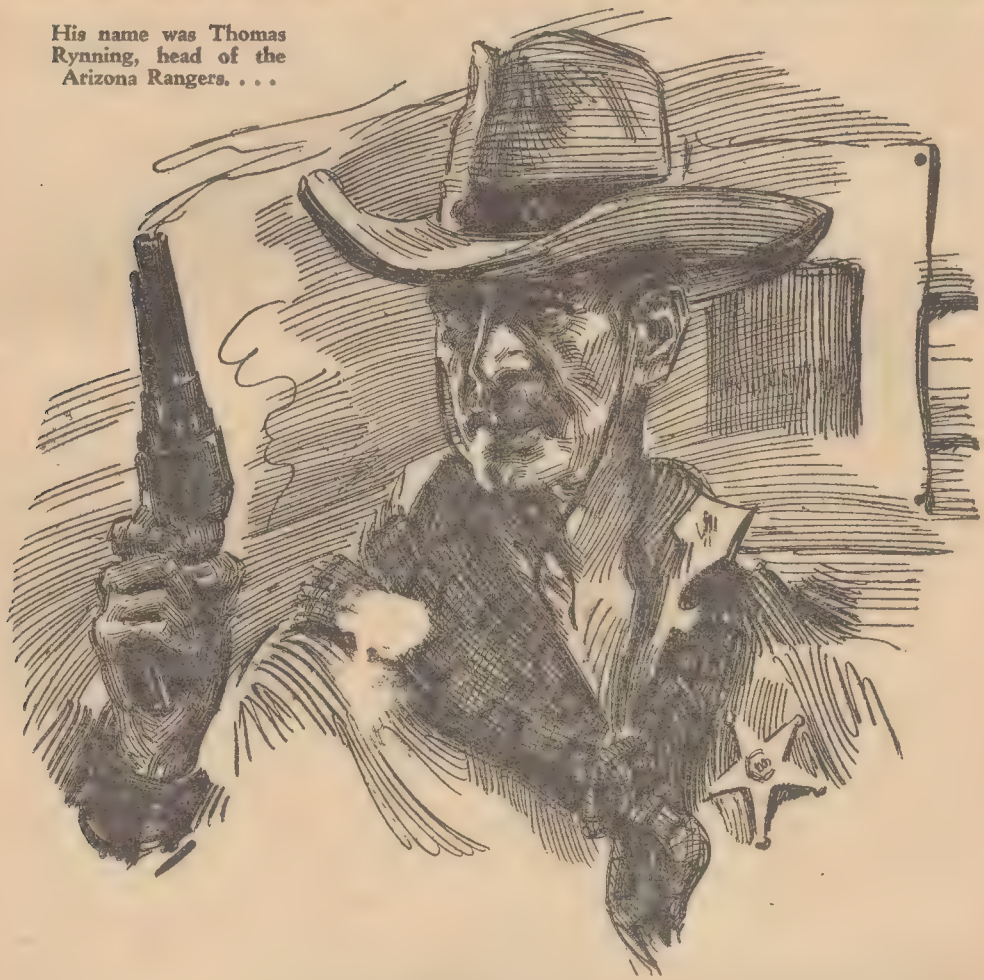
Men were kneeling by the body of Belden. Harty walked toward them, his gun still in his hand, unable to believe it yet.

Bob Egleston, who owned the Mercantile, had the gambler's gun in his hand,

(Continued on page 126)

INVEST IN YOUR FUTURE BUY U.S. SECURITY BONDS NOW! FOR A SAFE TOMORROW!

BORDER LAW-BOSS



His name was Thomas Rynning, head of the Arizona Rangers. . . .

By LESLIE ERNENWEIN

HE HAD the look of a man approaching an important mission, this tall rider who eased through the saloon's batwing gates. His right hand hovered close to the holster and his gray eyes held the questing intentness of a hunting hawk. His name was Thomas Rynning and he had come in search of the notorious outlaw gun, Scarface Woods.

Few men now living witnessed the dramatic details of that sun-hammered day in Rodeo, Arizona, soon after the turn of the century. Most of them are dead, and some of them died with their boots on. But Joe Pearce, who runs a little jag of cattle near Springerville, re-

Tom Rynning of the Rangers believed in bringing his outlaws back alive . . . And the men he hunted believed just as firmly in bringing Rynning back mighty dead. . . .

members it well. A lean, lanky man of seventy-six, Joe knew Thomas Rynning intimately.

"Captain Tom hired me into the Arizona Rangers," Pearce announced proudly. "I'll show you a copy of the message he sent askin' me to join his hell-for-leather bunch of badgetoters. Arizona Territory was a regular outlaws' paradise in them days. I'm tellin' you it was somethin' fierce how the Wild Bunch had took over. Seemed like all the noose-dodgin' renegades in the United States had high-tailed out here to git rich with a gun."

The history books bear out Joe's contention. During three riproarious decades following the Civil War, Arizona Territory became host to such notorious outlaws as Black Jack Ketchum, Curly Bill Brocius, Red Pipkins, Three-Fingered Jack, Bronco Bill Walters, Cole Young, Gunner Spindel and other gunsmoke galoots who migrated from Texas, the Cherokee Strip, Colorado, California and Old Mexico.

Banks, stagecoaches and railroad trains were looted with shocking loss of life and property; whole herds of cattle were rustled and roundup remudas stolen. By the turn of the century Arizona had become a veritable Renegades' Roost crowded with killers, thieves and tough drifters of every description who flouted the inadequate forces of law and order with a thumb-to-nose derision.

"It got so bad some of the big cow outfits was goin' broke," Joe Pearce explained. "Ranch payrolls was robbed before the bossman rode a mile from town. Roundup camps was raided at night whilst cowboys slept in their bedrolls. The thieves would run off our horses, settin' us afoot, then take the beef herd we'd gathered. Sheriffs didn't seem to make no headway at all—even the honest ones. Them outlaws was too slick for 'em. They'd ambush a posse before it hardly got started. Many a brave cowboy was toted back to the home ranch roped to his saddle after bein' in a posse that was bushwhacked. Things finally got so bad that Governor Brody talked the legislature into settin' up the Arizona Rangers, a real tough crew of cowboys that could fight the outlaws at their own game. And mister—that took some doin'. Most of the owlhooters was greased lightnin' with a gun. If you've ever saw the way a .45 slug messes up a man you'll understand that bein' a Ranger was a real hazardous chore."

The Ranger detail was organized in 1901 under Burt Mossman, who was succeeded as captain by Thomas Rynning in 1902. "I was runnin' a little bunch of cattle in the White Mountain country at that time," Pearce recalled. "After Tom Rynning took over the Rangers I got to itchin' for some action and wrote to him offerin' to sign on with his badgetoters. Didn't hear from him for quite a spell, then I got a message sayin':

> PROCEED TO BORDER. WILL ENLIST YOU. SHORT THREE RANGERS. YOUR HELP BADLY NEEDED.

"That sure pleasured me, and I was the proudest young feller in Arizona the day Cap Rynning handed me badge No. 13. That was at Douglas, smackdab on the Mexican Border and a rough town if ever I saw one."

PEARCE retains a deep respect for Thomas Rynning. "He was a real man in every sense of the word. Stood over six foot, strong-muscled and smooth movin'. Captain Tom was a dead shot with a pistol, but he wasn't a killer like the gunhawks that seemed to enjoy cuttin' a man down. I'll prove that by tellin' you about the fracas at Rodeo the day he went after Scarface Woods. But first I'd like to brag about him bein' such a good boss that he ramrodded a bunch of salty cow-

pokes into a first class law enforcement outfit. There wasn't a rule or regulation that Cap Rynning didn't live up to himself, and he expected us Rangers to do the same.

"There probably never was a better horseman than Tom Rynning. He could mount a horse without using his hands, which is quite a trick. He had drove Texas longhorns up the trail to Dodge City as a boy, and then joined the Eighth Cavalry at the age of nineteen, and served under Captain Randlett of Troop D. In 1898 he enlisted in the Rough Riders with the Arizona Column and was only a few yards from Captain Bucky O'Neil when that famous officer was killed in Cuba.

"Cap Rynning gained the ever-lasting admiration of Colonel Teddy Roosevelt by stealin' ammunition from the Tenth Cavalry after the Rough Riders had used up all their shells stormin' San Juan Hill. They'd never of been able to hold the hill agin the Spaniards' counter attack if it hadn't been for them stolen bullets. So when Teddy got to be president he asked Tom Rynning to take charge of the Arizona Rangers, and he couldn't of picked a better man."

Rynning, who made his headquarters at Douglas, Arizona, a tent and shack boomtown across the railroad tracks from Agua Prieta, Sonora, succeeded in having the Ranger force increased from fourteen to twenty-five. It seems fantastic that so small a force should have been thrown against the owlhoot horde which had practically taken over Arizona Territory. Yet these twenty-five men, faced with the responsibility of policing a region larger than all new England, accomplished the job.

Although most of the Rangers records have been lost, one report, signed by Captain Rynning, is indicative of the Herculean efforts of the hard-riding, straight-shooting brigade of badgetoters. In a nine-month period, between October 2, 1901 and July 30, 1902, while the Rangers were only fourteen strong, ninety-five arrests were made and none of these for trivial offenses. Thirty men were jailed for highway robbery, nine for murder, and the others for crimes such as rustling, horse-stealing, smuggling and assault with deadly weapons.

With Rynning were such outstanding Rangers as Harry Wheeler, who later became captain, Billy Olds, Timberline Sparks, Dave Warford, and Jeff Kidder. All ex-cowboys and all men "to ride the river with." The group was as unregimented as a roundup crew—without uniforms, flags or military equipment—yet it smashed the outlaw legion which sheriffs' posses and cavalry troops had been unable to corral. The Rangers' loyalty to Captain Rynning, and to each other, is graphically illustrated by the long vengeance trail taken by Billy Olds after the killing of his Ranger pard, Jeff Kidder.

Two smugglers had been shot during a running fight with Kidder. Shortly afterward six of the gang opened fire on the Ranger when he visited a cantina on the Mexican side of the line in Naco. But Kidder was a fast man with a gun. And, as the saying goes, "long-gutted as a steeldust horse."

Although badly wounded, Kidder succeeded in killing three of his attackers with three shots—an almost unbelievable accomplishment which illustrates his uncanny speed and accuracy with a gun. Then, with two shells left, Kidder staggered toward the international boundary line and was within a few yards of it when a bullet knocked him down.

Even then, so weak from loss of blood that he could scarcely rise to a kneeling position, Kidder wounded one of the smugglers. But another bullet blinded him so that he missed his final shot. His gun was empty when the three remaining smugglers closed in and kicked the dying Ranger to death.

Upon hearing of the tragic affair, Billy Olds swore vengeance. As a Ranger he could not invade Mexico without causing trouble for Captain Rynning. So he turned in his badge, took the smugglers' trail and was gone for several months. When Billy returned he told his Ranger friends that he had squared Jeff Kidder's killing with the three smugglers.

CAPTAIN RYNNING had an unwritten agreement with Mexican officials whereby the Rangers could cross into Mexico when chasing an American outlaw. But Mexican rustlers and smugglers had to be captured, or killed, before they crossed the border. Which is why so many of the Ranger reports read: "Killed resisting arrest."

Rynning took long chances himself in order to arrest an outlaw instead of killing him. A firm believer in the fundamental principles of jurisprudence, he maintained that even a horsethief should be brought to the bar of justice for his inalienable right of trial by jury. In this respect Rynning differed with such illustrious lawmen as Sheriff John Slaughter who never brought back a horsethief prisoner. Stealing horses in those days was considered a worse offense than murder; if Slaughter was convinced a man had committed this crime he killed him on the spot.

"Although Captain Tom was strict in some ways, he was easy-goin' and friendly most of the time," Pearce explained. "Cap spoke in a soft, low voice and was a great hand to sit with his boots propped on the top of his desk. Usually had a cigar in his mouth and a sort of half-smile on his face. But he sure wasn't smilin' that day he went into the Rodeo saloon after Scarface Woods. I guess Captain Tom knowed the big outlaw wouldn't be took without a fight, but even so, Tom gave him all the best of it, like always.

"Woods was standin' at the bar when Cap Rynning eased into the saloon and told the outlaw he was under arrest. But instead of surrenderin', Woods whirled and drew his gun. Tom, who already had his six-shooter out, could of shot Woods through the heart at that close range.

"A feller usually don't think about nothin' but survival at a time like that. The only law he's concerned with when he sees a man drawin' agin him is the law of self-preservation. But Captain Rynning was different. Instead of choosin' the big target Woods' chest made, he fired at the outlaw's gun hand, hit his trigger finger and knocked the gun to the floor.

"That was enough for Scarface. He yelped like a dog while Cap Rynning calmly took out his pocket knife and cut the finger stump off clean, then doused it in bar whiskey to disinfect it. Still talkin' soft and low voiced, he told Scarface agin that he was under arrest. And this time Woods believed him."

In 1907 Captain Rynning resigned from the Rangers to become warden of Yuma Prison, completing the cycle whereby he rode herd on many of the renegades his star-packers had arrested. Through Rynning's efforts the notorious institution on the banks of the muddy Colorado River was improved. Later a new territorial prison was erected at Florence, Arizona, most of the work being done by convict volunteers eager to accept Rynning's offer of two days off their sentences for each day worked.

Later Rynning served with distinction as a U. S. marshal at San Diego, California, and in 1943 rode over the Great Divide with more laurels than most men accumulate in one lifetime. But to the few remaining Arizona Rangers like Joe Pearce, Thomas Rynning is best remembered and most admired for his gallant and courageous role as Law Boss of the Border.

KILLER LOOSE IN

CHAPTER ONE

Back from the Dead

NEW MEXICO wore her party dress, welcoming the gaunt, gray man on the weary pony. Along the Pecos the grass was lush and green. The cottonwoods donned a verdant raiment. Blackbirds wheeled dizzy patterns above the flooded *bosques*. Westward, Old Cap-

They went for their guns.

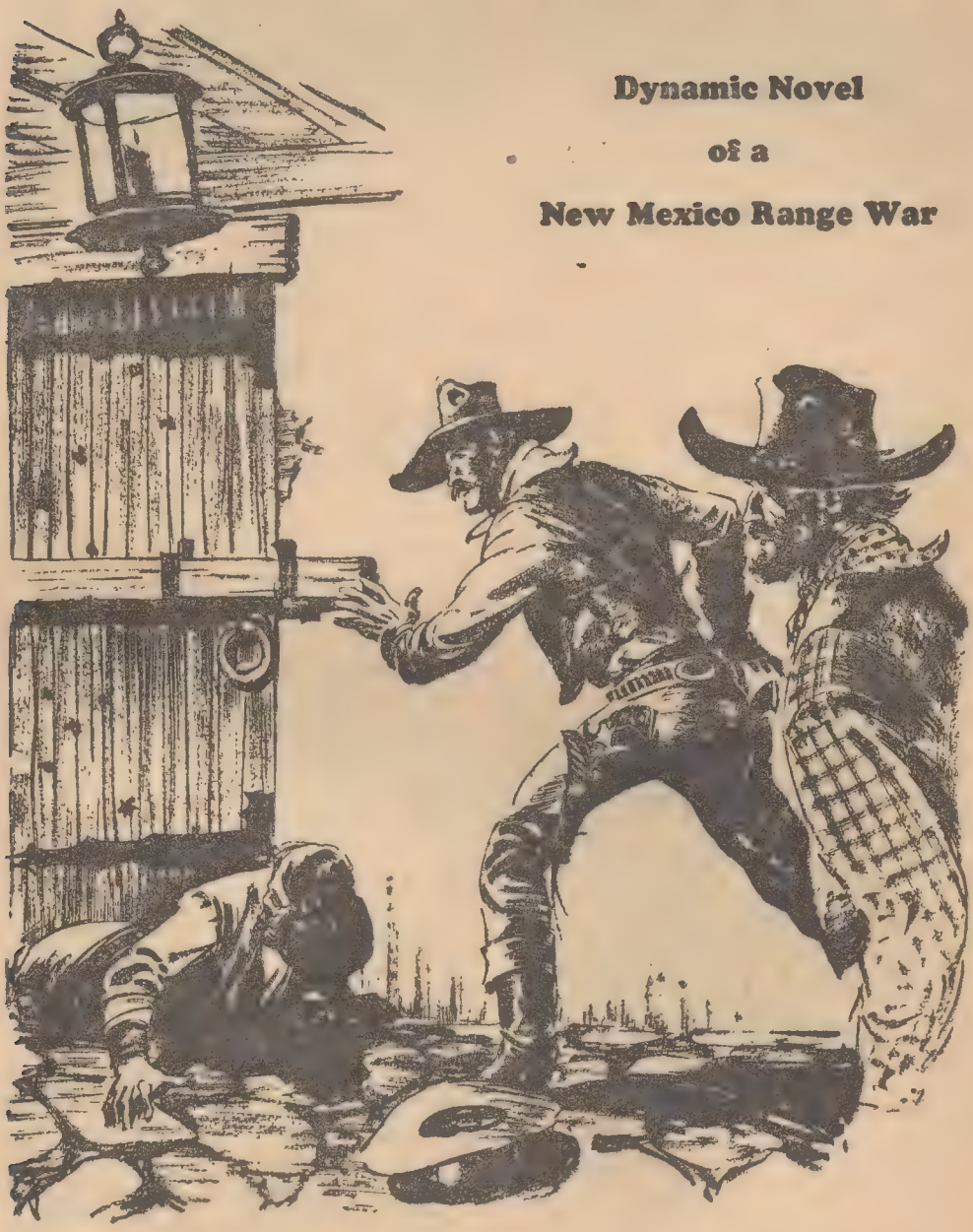
By
HARRY F. OLMSTED

LINCOLN COUNTY!

Dynamic Novel

of a

New Mexico Range War



"Welcome to Lincoln County, stranger. If you're fightin' for Boss Morphy—ride on in! If you're ridin' for McSween and Billy the Kid—you've got till sundown to clear out! If you ain't made up your mind yet—start prayin'!"

itan reared skyward and the mountains marched, mile on mile, toward the Sierra Blanca crest. This land was meat and drink to Grant Bartee, and peace for his troubled soul.

Grant, heading toward a small ranch below Patricio, needed courage before the ordeal. He followed the Salt Trail, threaded the tangled bottoms, splashed across the murmuring Bonito and tipped up the bank. Four riders waited there, chill-eyed, hands near their guns. One, with a sheriff's silvered badge, leered at Grant.

"Welcome to Lincoln, stranger. Ridin' to fight for McSween, I presume."

Grant looked them over. Besides the sheriff, there were two deputies—one grizzled, the other a florid man of thirty. The fourth man, swart, spare and straight, with the high cheeks of an Indian, stared at Grant, uneasy thoughts darkening his eyes. He showed no recognition, nor did Grant.

"Bad guess, sheriff. Only fighting I do is for my rights. Never heard of McSween an' don't know why he's fighting. I'm out of the north, minding my own business."

"Said business being . . .?"

"My own business, I said, not yours."

The sheriff flushed. "You'll last quick, friend. The wise man takes sides, putting guns beside him instead of all around him. I hate to bury you, so look over Morphy's offer—hundred a month, grub an' ca'tridges. Let me know tomorrow. Let's go, boys."

He spurred away, his deputies alongside. The fourth man lingered, silent until they'd vanished. Then he gigged over to give his hand.

"H'are yuh, Grant. Been watching for you. Bad times here in Lincoln County."

Grant nodded. "I heard, in Santa Fe. What's stewing?"

"A plumb tough hen, Grant. Billy Bonney, your good looking cousin, has gone gun crazy. The Kid, they're calling him. Billy the Kid! Those three brave lawmen—Sheriff Brody an' Deputies Pippin an' Handman—took twenty armed men to serve an English pilgrim with a court summons. Tunstall. They killed him an' only missed his foreman, Brewer, an' Billy Bonney, 'cause they'd gone hunting."

Grant remembered that Tunstall had bought the Chavez Ranch. "Tunstall resisted, eh?"

"Him?" Blacky snorted. "He wouldn't resist a mouse. But in partnering with McSween an' Chisum, he threatened to ruin Boss Morphy. Billy's gunned three of that posse an' swears to kill 'em all. Morphy offers a hundred dollars for his scalp. Hell's afloat, fella, an' if they learn you're Billy's cousin—"

"You wrote," interrupted Grant, "that dad's bucking trouble again. How? He think I'm dead?"

Blacky brooded. "Yes. Dead. He'll not suspect you was in prison—now."

Grant glanced toward the Ruidoso, where Acton Bartee had taken his family after drought and Apaches had run him off the Sapello. They mustn't know, he thought. I'll take a quick look and ride away. "My brother?" he asked. "Jack should be seventeen. Is he a big fellow? Is he good to mother?"

Blacky sighed. "Steady, boy. Raiders murdered your folks, crippled Jack an' burned out the spread. Jack made it into the brush where a sheepherder's dogs discovered him next day. The old pastor took him home and nursed him back to life."

It hit Grant hard. Only now, when it was too late, did he realize fully why he had returned to New Mexico. "You mean Jack's helpless and burdening some poor Mexican family?"

"Helpless, yeah, but not livin' off Mexicans. When Jack recovered, I went back to Silver City. Old Jeb Daughters had gone belly-up on Turkey Crick an' was

too sick to start again. He moved into Silver where Anna May opened a lunch room an' coffee counter. It was a terrible struggle an' when I asked her to come here an' look after Jack, she jumped at it. She and Jeb run the ABC, such as it is. She'll be most mortal glad, Grant, that you're back."

Grant shook his head. "How can so many things happen, Blacky? It's wonderful that Ann would come here to look after Jack, but—but how do they eat? Where does the money come from?"

BLACK Bob Blake blinked and looked away. His laugh wasn't impressive. "Oh, Jeb keeps busy with the cattle, selling a few now and then. It's a good little spread. They'll get along."

"Ann. She's never married?"

"She said she'd wait for you, didn't she?"

"Wait?" Grant was bitter. "For what? I can't offer her a dime, or a decent explanation. No, Blacky, we better let sleeping dogs lie."

"Don't gimme that hogwash, Grant. If you feel thataway, why'd you come back? You saved my skin an' that I won't forget. I'm grateful. I'd like to help you."

"Good. Tell me who killed my folks. Who crippled Jack, an' why?"

Blacky shied. "I gotta get back now, Grant, but I want to talk. Stable your pony, have your trail drink an' wait for me in one of Hop Long's cafe booths—beyond the old church. *Suerte.*"

He spurred after the lawmen and Grant drew a long breath, stirring his tired pony. He was thoughtful, morose, full of old regrets and new ones. Blacky's information had proved shocking. It all served to turn his mind backward.

Absently he stabled his horse, had a drink of bad whiskey in an adobe saloon and strolled along the walk toward Hop Long's Cafe. This was Grant's old stamping ground—a place of gay debauch when he had ridden for John Chisum. Men looked him over, men of familiar mien.

But Grant, having seen himself, feared no recognition. His once brown, wavy hair was stringy, thin, badger-gray. His once boyish face was deeply lined. His pale, gray eyes were haunted by shadows forever dimming a man's zest.

Entering Hop Long's, Grant took a booth, drew the curtains and ordered coffee. And while he waited, he recaptured a dead past, communing again with unlaid ghosts, reliving old dreams, knowing again the fateful impulses that had separated him from all he held dear.

Looking backward, Grant saw only a life of frustration. From ten to thirteen, he had lived in the ebb and flow of a deadly war, hating the locust-like Yankees flooding southward in ever-increasing hordes, fearful for his father who rode with Morgan's Guerrillas, listening to the far thunder of battle and beating brave tattoos on a homemade drum. His mother and Aunt Kathleen restrained him from joining Lee's hard-pressed troops when the flag of the Confederacy was dipping low.

After Appomattox, Acton Bartee came home from the wars, broken in health and purse and spirit, feverish to depart for new scenes where he could forget the dreadful bitterness of defeat. Grant, wild to go to Mexico with a large group of emigrating neighbors, was again denied.

With his father and mother, carrying a few personal belongings, he rolled westward to Texas and the godless territories lying west of the Pecos. His Aunt Kathleen added further to Grant's misery by marrying a Yankee and going to New York to live.

The long, gruelling trip across the wilderness to the Gila River, in New Mexico. . . . The wild homestead on the Sapello. . . . Cattle grazing the timbered Diablos. . . . Happy years, with the agony of the Lost Cause dimming. . . . Grant's

cup of happiness full when word came that Aunt Kathleen, lately widowed, was coming to Silver with her nine-year-old son—Billy Bonney.

But frequent visits to Aunt Kathleen's boarding house in Silver did not bring him expected pleasure. She hadn't changed but Grant didn't like the silent, unfriendly man who courted her. Nor could he understand Billy, whose thoughts were not Grant's, whose fun was not hunting and fishing but "eyeballing" high-stake gambles. At ten, Billy was too expert a dealer for the run of "blanket" monte games around the diggings. He had a gun and he practiced, sneering at cartridges wasted on game.

Grant was now a first class horse-and-rope man, taking a man's place in the roundups. Chosen to ride swing on a Pool trail drive to the Black Range mining camps, he drank in the yarns of men who had been up the McCoy, Chisholm and Goodnight Trails, letting his fingers grow.

Next season, Acton Bartee denied this eighteen-year-old. Devil's River drovers were crying for young, adventurous cowboys, but they must do without Grant. There were strained feelings between father and son.

COTTONWOOD buds were breaking into leaf when Billy Bonney came riding to the ABC with a note from Aunt Kahleen. The boy had knifed a blacksmith to death for insulting her on the street. The law was looking for Billy. Would Acton look after the boy till the matter blew over?

Grant rebelled when his father turned the precocious killer over to him. That afternoon Grant got his rifle, told his mother he was going after a turkey, and rode up Sapello toward the Mimbres Divide. A week later, on the Pecos, he fell in with a Jinglebob crew gathering beef for a drive to Wyoming. Grant signed on.

That was a hell drive, and only because of the cruelty of the trail-boss, Cowskin Dogger, a towering, tireless brute who spoiled for trouble and never drew a sober breath. Cursing the men. Daring them to fight. Smashing them to earth.

Along those dusty miles stretching north from Denver, they all felt the weight of Cowskin's hand, Grant more than the rest. Nineteen now, six feet, one hundred and eighty, Grant restrained his primitive instincts with difficulty. But one morning when Cowskin swung at him, Grant ducked and struck. Cowskin pinwheeled, arms and legs flailing, and sprawled, his astonishment waking bawls of mirth from the crew.

Grant let the big man up, ignoring their yells to give him the boots. It was an error. Grant fought bravely, making Cowskin look bad until a maul-like blow all but decapitated him. He took a ghastly beating.

Wagon camp, at Two Butte Crossing of the Arkansas. . . . Cowskin, a lone, sullen brute, brooding at his own fire. . . . Without a single quality to soften the festering hatred of his crew. . . . Grant, in his blankets, dabbing at his bruised eyes.

"I don't get it, Blacky," he mumbled, to his side partner. "What's he expect to gain, acting thisaway? It don't make sense."

"Oh yes it does." The segundo, bedded on the other side of him, answered for Black Bob Blake. Tall, happy-go-lucky Pat Garrett was a good soldier. He'd obeyed orders and taken abuse, never protesting, never flaunting his fast-draw reputation. "I've got that big hunk of bull meat figgered. He's gone all out to make us quit. If we had, his own crew would of poured down to take over. Haven't you seen riders skylined along the way? Well, time's short now. We can expect stampede an' attack most any time." He raised to one elbow as someone hailed the camp. "Ooze into your boots, boys. This may be it!"

Three bearded men dismounted at the edge of firelight, rattling their spurs—men with nickled badges of authority and sharp, probing eyes. They were cattle inspectors, officers of the Commonwealth of Wyoming, looking for evidence of Texas Fever, pleasant men, full of sparkling talk.

Pat Garrett, Blacky Blake, Ad Cutting, Frosty Frane and Grant were sitting together on Grant's blankets, listening to the lawmen tell Cowskin they were holding him up a few days while they tested the herd for disease. Cowskin came to his feet, bawling in his usual raucous manner, promising war if anybody even tried to delay his drive.

Cowskin's tirade ceased in a gunblast. Mortally struck, he stiffened, swayed and jackknifed into the fire. So close was the murder weapon, it deafened Grant. Men came up, drawing. A gun was pressed into Grant's hand, something that didn't surprise him: he'd left his weapon in his blankets. He was horrified to find the gun smoking, and the three inspectors covering him. "Why'd you murder him, fella?"

"Why shouldn't he?" rapped Pat Garrett. "Cowskin had that coming."

"Look what he did to Bartee's face," added Cutting.

"I was sitting beside him," drawled Blacky. "I didn't see Grant shoot."

"I didn't," declared Grant. "Some gent stuck this in my hand, after the shot."

Sneering at this, the lawmen disarmed him, then set about to learn the truth. After much wrangling, they arrested Grant and would have taken Blacky except that Grant absolved him. It might have been Pat Garrett. Or Ad Cutting. In clearing Blacky, the judge held that Grant had practically confessed. A cowland jury in Laramie gave Grant ten years for manslaughter.

Blacky stayed with Grant till they took him away, then returned to New Mexico with word that Grant had died, vainly striving to save the stampeding Jinglebob herd. Now, with three years off for good behavior, Grant was back in his beloved New Mexico—a country he knew he should avoid. Back for a look at his kid brother. Back for a look at the girl who had kissed him farewell.

Grant roused, first noticing his coffee. The waiter had come and gone, unnoticed. The brew was cold. A chuckle came from between drawn curtains. Blacky stepped in, grinning.

"Grant, meet my good friend. Come in, Kid." Billy Bonney came through the drapes and for a minute he and Grant stared, neither finding words.

"H'are yuh, Cousin!" Billy's voice was soft, his grip strong. "Just the same."

"Liar." Grant laughed, knowing the years and their changes. "You've grown, Billy, but I don't see any sharp horns or lashing tail. Let's eat."

They sat. A Chinese brought drinks and a meal. Watching Billy, Grant weighed what he saw with what he'd heard. The Kid was handsome, soft-spoken, a little shy. Slender, lithe, small like his mother, he wore his hair long. His eyes were dreamy, gentle. It was hard to believe that this pleasing lad was a cold killer. "How's your mother, Billy? Aunt Kathleen's my favorite relation."

All gentleness was gone from the Kid. "Ma caught pneumonia, three years ago. Her no-good husband quit her cold, without calling a medico. I can't kill him till I learn where he's at. An' your folks are dead, Grant—all but Jack. He's bedfast. I want to talk about him." He lifted his glass. "Here's to fresh-dug graves, boys."

CHAPTER TWO

Billy the Kid

GRANT was fascinated by his stripling cousin. Billy was nineteen—Grant's age when he had trailed north under Cow-

skin Dogger. He talked fluently, intensely convincing.

"Here's the picture, Grant. Major Morphy's pardner was Colonel Emil Fritz, who had McSween draw his will and, after selling his store to Morphy, went to Germany, where he died. Morphy then produced faked claims against the Fritz estate."

"Fake is right," broke in Blacky. "He never even paid Fritz off."

"Not nearly," agreed the Kid. "McSween took Fritz's Santa Fe bank account for unpaid legal services, so Morphy sued McSween. And John Chisum, just because he was McSween's pardner—"

"To hell with Lincoln's troubles," snapped Grant. "You tell it interesting, Billy, but can't you tell me what happened to my folks?"

Devils danced in Billy's eyes. "Morphy killed them, as surely as if he pulled the trigger. Fritz and your dad were friends, when the colonel was commandant at Fort Bayard, outa Silver. After going bust, your dad got help from Fritz—money, cows and a ranch on the Ruidoso, below Patricio."

Grant began to see the tie-up. "Did dad pay Fritz off, Billy?"

"I wouldn't know. But Morphy claims not. When Fritz died, Morphy ordered Uncle Acton out, through a capper. When he refused, he got it fast from Morphy guns."

"Know who the riders were?" asked Grant, icily.

The Kid grinned. "Sure. Maybe I couldn't prove it in court. I've killed two I'm sure were there an' you've talked with three more."

"You mean the sheriff?"

"And his mealy-mouthed deputies. Don't worry; I'll chop their hash tomorrow." He beamed like any boy propounding his pet project. Grant's insides twisted.

"Good lord, Billy—"

"Don't turn squeamish, Grant. Brody an' his night-riders didn't, when they hit your folks. This is war an' I'm killing the kit and caboodle of 'em. Morphy's hirin' guns, paying important money. Chisum would, but McSween's got religion bad. He tells me God will destroy our enemies."

"Faith like that has worked wonders," murmured Grant.

"Mebbyso, but it can't kill sneaking human coyotes. But don't worry about pay if you throw in with us, Grant. There's cattle for the taking and I know markets. You won't starve and the skunk hunting should be more than interesting."

Coming from one so young, the suggestion held a cold terror. Grant masked his feelings. "Not yet, Billy. I'm tired. I aim to rest, heal my saddle corns an'—"

"An' while you're restin'," finished Billy, drily, "they'll move against Jack, Old Man Daughters an' Anna May. Don't see why Cutting has held off this long."

"Cutting?" Grant recalled that cynical man hunkering beside him, the night Cowskin had died. "What about Cutting?"

"Before you answer, Kid," broke in Blacky, "let me tell Grant that Ad Cutting brags how he jobbed you after shooting Cowskin. He's the only one who busted his promise not to tell the truth about you. All right, Kid. Tell him the rest."

"Ad Cutting," muttered the Kid, "is a cull—another two-bit gunman licking Morphy's boots. But he knows stock an' when Morphy seized Fritz's Ruidoso spread, he put Ad in charge. He struck at ABC, missed Jack an' would have tried again except he fell for Anna May. See the need of playin' sudden an' for keeps?"

"I see it." Grant attacked his food, but he had no appetite now. "I'll play sudden an' for keeps." His eyes narrowed on Blacky. "How about you, fella? You acted mighty chummy with Brody an' his mates."

Blacky held, silent and grim. The Kid laughed. "Blacky's your best friend, Grant. He knows I'm right an' worked with me, even while enjoying the confidence of the Morphy crowd. To win quick, I need a spy that can learn Morphy's plans."

SUBTLE change transformed the Kid's face. He rose, loosened his gun. Strain dimmed his grin as he shook Grant's hand.

"Look the ABC over, Grant. Take Blacky along. If you need help, send him for me. Gotta sift along. Can't stay too long in one place. See you soon." He floated from the booth and was gone. Grant was staring after him when the curtains parted and Sheriff Brody stepped in, gun palmed.

"Hm." His dark eyes roved restlessly. "Kid's not here?"

"Billy?" Blacky scoffed. "We was just plannin' how to collect his bounty."

Brody grunted, scrutinizing the empty place, plate and cup. Authority roweled him. He was thirty-five, heavy-boned and muscled. His hair was ebon, his face broad, blunt and ruddy. A scar split his forehead. His nose had been broken in combat. A pugnacious chin lent him the look of a buldog. His voice was a growl.

"Thinkin' so deep you order three meals for two men? Explain that, Blacky."

Again Blacky looked hurt. "I'm grieved, Brody, that *you* question my motives."

"Yeah?" There was less friendliness in Brody than open suspicion. "You've given me several reasons to suspect your loyalty, Blake. You know I won't abide a traitor, don't you?"

"Sheriff," rapped Grant, "you jump too fast and too far on circumstantial evidence. Did you ever live three weeks on crackers, cheese and coulee water?"

Brady gave him chill-eyed curiosity. "You don't look that starved, fella. All right, let's say you ate a square, ordered another and found your eyes bigger'n your stomach. No use askin' the Chink; like the *pelados*, he'd lie for the Kid. I'll see you in the morning an' you better have all the answers. G'night."

He went out.

Blacky sighed. "Whee-ew! That was close, pardner. Le's get outside."

Blacky, who roomed and boarded with a Mexican family beyond the McSween home, insisted that Grant make use of his quarters. So Grant went down there with him and slept the night in a good bed of rawhide springs and husk tick.

They slept late, rose to enjoy one of Señora Melendez's fine breakfasts and went out onto the long street stretching down the Bonito, rested, relaxed and quite in tune with the bright warmth of the unclouded spring morning.

"April the First," sighed Blacky, puffing a cigar alight. "I hope it's no April Fool's errand—our trip out to the ABC. Reckon we better get out there, pardner. The Kid was concerned about things out there, and he has a nose for that sort of trouble. Want to leave now?"

Grant rubbed his stubbled cheeks. "I'd like to get a shave," he confessed, "but it's probably better if I wear the brush. Ann won't be so apt to recognize me."

Blacky bit off his weed and spat. "Grant, if you keep that fine gal waiting another day, you're cruel as hell an' plumb loco. Tell her who you are. Tell her what happened an' I'll put in my four bits worth. That's the first thing you must make up your mind to. If you decide against it, I suggest you ride to hell outa here an' let her go on thinkin' you're dead, let her go on grievin'." He had pulled up short. "What you going to do? I've gotta know."

"I'll shave 'em off," said Grant, and moved toward a saloon where a barber flaunted his striped pole. Blacky fell in beside him, but his interest had shifted to

a quartet that suddenly emerged from the Morphy store and came lazily forward.

Sheriff Brody and Deputy Handman carried rifles. Deputy Pippin and the fourth man wore short guns. Their martial panoply grated on the peace that lay along that street.

"What they up to, Blacky? Who's that fourth man?"

"That's Matthews—Clerk of the Circuit Court. Wonder what that means. You reckon they caught the Kid last night?"

GRANT had no answer as he choked back a rising uneasiness inside him. Sheriff Brody spotted them and hailed Blacky. "If somebody don't put a hum in the Kid's neck," he sang out, "we may as well move out an' give him the town. Got word from Judge Bristol this morning. He's not coming up from Mesilla to open the regular term of Circuit Court. Admits frankly he's scairt the Kid will murder him."

"Sorta stretchin' the point, ain't it?" asked Blacky, quietly. "You think the Kid would harm the judge?"

"Wouldn't put it past the polecat, Blacky." The sheriff's party came up, pausing a moment. "Billy's gun loco an' itchin' to kill. But that ain't the point. Judge ain't comin' up an' he ordered me to open court this morning, then adjourn it per routine. We're on our way there now. Come on along an' act as witnesses."

Blacky looked at Grant, who nodded. No use antagonizing Brody this early in the game. They fell in with those four and walked down toward the courthouse, lazing along, reveling in the first warm morning of spring, savoring the perfumes of new grass, fresh plowed fields, bottomland growth and the resinous sweetness of the *piñones* on the hillsides. They walked past the McSween home and store, past the adobe Church of Saint John, past modest adobe homes with carefully tended gardens aflame with color.

Brody was in rare good humor as he quipped with buxom *señoras* in their doorways, as he saluted Captain Baca, on his porch across from the McSween store, and joshed the loiterers smoking *cigarillos* along the sun-drenched store front. They passed the store. Dad Pippin snorted.

"'Longside what the county pays us, Billy the Kid's pay from Ol' John Chisum really jingles. Looks like the people could afford to pay for us protectin' 'em."

"So what?" asked the sheriff, tartly. "Billy dassent show his head to spend his money. An' he can't take it with him, where he's going."

"Gotta ketch a thief before you hang him, Sheriff," warned Handman.

"I don't care about hanging him," said Brody. "If I can get him over my rifle sights—"

Grant, on the outside and looking toward Brady, saw those six heads lift warily from behind the adobe wall. Six pairs of malevolent eyes, cruel and unwinking. Six men rising from that covert, guns bare in their hands. Billy the Kid at one end of that short file of death.

No effort of his own could have silenced Grant's: "Look out!" No measure of self-discipline could have prevented him grabbing Blacky and going to the dust with him. Startled, Brody and Pippin, Handman and Matthews turned to stare at Grant. The Kid's call was soft, almost jocular. "Brody!"

Those four men knew that voice. They whirled gamely to meet it. Six rifles gushed flame and lead. Brody flung his arms high, screaming as he wilted. Dad Pippin fell, rolled like a barrel, came to his feet and made safety around the corner of the store. Matthews dived for the wall, went to his hands and knees, crawled to the corner and vanished. Handman, heavily struck, stumbled to the axis of the street, his heavy feet stirring a dust. The Kid put him down with a bullet between the shoulders.

When Blacky would have risen, Grant said, "Don't be a fool," and pressed him down. Lying on his side, unharmed, he saw Billy vault the wall and leap toward them.

"Always did admire Brody's judgment in weapons," he said, moving unhurriedly to the dead sheriff's side, picking up his rifle and appropriating the short gun. "You boys lie right where you are till the bullet dust settles. He turned and gunshots roared from the Morphy store. The Kid whirled, staggered, barked: *"Vaya!"*

He took the wall at a bound, vanished. Moments later hoofbeats drifted to Grant's ears and Morphy henchmen came boiling to the street, excited, aroused, buzzing like maddened bees.

CHAPTER THREE

Guns of the Prodigal

THE KID and his five youthful followers were gone, unharmed by the wild lead thrown by the town. Dad Pippin, wounded by at least six slugs, was taking command, blistering the fronts with his frontier blue blazes, organizing pursuit. Peppin took a moment to level a finger at Blacky, even then moving toward the corral, with Grant beside him.

"Blake, you an' your stranger friend are under arrest! Accessories before the fact of murder. You conspired with that outlaw, Billy the Kid! You tolled us under the guns of them cutthroats—drew us right into a trap!"

"You're a liar!" raged Grant. "You tolled *us* under their guns. Brody enlisted us as witnesses for the opening of court and you know it."

"Hold on, Grant," cautioned Blacky. "Let me handle this. All right, Pippin, so we're under arrest. Now what? What you going to do about it?"

"Toss you in the hoosegow," yapped the old deputy, whose earlier fear was now changed to bluster. "An' throw the key away while I run down that murderin' renegade. Grab them two, men! Take 'em to my office—I'll be down directly."

Citizens had gathered and there was an immediate response to the order. They swayed toward Blacky and Grant, hauling up short as both men whipped out revolvers.

"I wouldn't try it, gents," warned Blacky, and he was smiling. "Let Pippin make his own arrests, which he won't, being yellow an' a liar to boot. Like my pardner says, we were amblin' along, mindin' our own business, when Brody asked us to come down to witness the opening of Circuit Court. We accommodated him.

"Pippin heard all that an' now he accuses us of leading him into an ambush. It might be interesting to learn why. Mebby something for the Grand Jury. Well, Pippin, you still want to arrest us? If you try, you'll hub a shootin' match that'll make the last one look like a firecracker-tossin' swarray."

The deputy fiddlefooted, chewing his straggly mustache, looking wildly about for signs of citizen support. "Mebby I was a bit rattled an' hasty," he admitted. "But that don't mean a clean bill for you two. You be around here for questionin' when I get back, you understand?"

"You make it clear enough, Pippin. The order exceeds your authority, but we'll not run away. Go do your do an' prove your right to wear that badge. Put up or shut up. Come on, Grant."

Blacky led the way to the stable, Grant striding beside him. Men stared after them, but no one made a hostile move or tried in any way to halt them. Lincoln town was still in a state of shock at this latest evidence of Billy the Kid's merciless savagery. . . .

A lone rider came catfooting his pony to the ABC—a thin, sickly looking man

with wickedness ground into his knife-blade face like grime into an unwashed skin. His black, round eyes drilled the silent, somnolent ranch like the bores of a scattergun. A few cattle watered at the Bonito, below the board-and-batten house. The corrals were empty. Everywhere were evidences of the dissolution incident to neglect.

Hack Ramage grinned at this scene as he dismounted. He trailed the rein, jacked his gunbelt into place. A spasm of coughing shook him and when it had passed, he wiped blood flecks off his lips with a silk handkerchief. It had been like that for five years, ever since he'd come out from the east—to die.

"He'll need just one more clean shirt," they had said of him then. They were saying it now. But those who knew him best, his wiry strength, his fearlessness and careless magic with a gun, said that when Hack died it would be with the lead of some faster killer in his vitals.

HACK RAMAGE grinned that the ABC was so peaceful. He'd take care of that pronto. His wide brim hat drooped forlornly. Great roweled Mexican spurs sang as he drove his grotesquely thin legs to the door. He rapped with the barrel of his gun and stood back as footsteps sounded inside.

The door opened and a young woman stood there. Anna May Daughters was no longer a girl, but she was young, neat and attractive. She looked at the little man at the stoop, at the gun in his hand, at the long list of broken commandments written across his sere and leathery cheeks. Her blue-green eyes were like polished turquoise—hard, secretive, coldly impersonal.

"Well?" she said. "What was it?"

Hack swept off his big hat with something of gallantry. "Howdy, ma'am. I want to talk to the boss, Jack Bartee."

"About what?"

"If I was tellin' everybody, ma'am, I wouldn't ask for him. But who am I to deny a pretty gal like yourself? I'd like to buy this ranch, ma'am. Look at it. It's drying to hardscrabble. Soon it'll blow away, you with it. Let me talk to Bartee."

"And you with a gun?" Anna May scoffed. "Jack's ill, crippled by night riders. He'll see nobody. How much do you offer for ABC?"

"A thousand cartwheels. Fifty double eagles, cash on the barrelhead."

"That's your best offer?"

"That's the cut and tally, ma'am."

Her eyes blazed. "Go tell Major Morphy he'll have to finish his killing here if he gets this outfit. As for you, Hack Ramage, you can—"

"We'll carry the fight to you," came a voice from inside. Jack Bartee stepped out on his crutches, tall, white, drawn with illness, terribly determined.

"Jack!" Anna May turned, scolding. "Get back to bed. The doctor said—"

"Damn the doctors." Jack's voice was weak. "All I need is steak and whiskey and a hand in running ABC." He saw the gunman. His hand dropped to his belted gun. "Hack Ramage," he snarled. "Morphy's night-skulking bushwhacker!"

Ramage sighed. "Alas, my poor reputation. What about ABC, bravo? You'll take my thousand or you'll fill your hand an' start that hogleg to smoking. Which will it be, Bartee?"

"How brave," sneered Anna May. "Challenging a cripple. Jack, get inside and shuck that gun. You're no match for this murderous thing. Get along, Ramage! We'll not deal with you or Morphy either. Get out!"

Hatred showed in the flash and flare of Hack's eyes in the downcurving of his bitter lips. "Sister, I'll go when he signs an agreement to sell—or until I've cut another notch in my pistol grip. Shake it up, Bartee. I ain't got all day. A thousand simoleons or a hot slug—which?"

Jack settled on his crutches. His elbows angled. His fingers taloned. Anna May made a last frantic effort.

"Ramage, my dad's in the barn. His rifle never misses. Reach for that gun and you'll get it where your galluses cross."

Hack laughed, never shifting his glance from Jack. "Don't josh me, Sister. I'll laugh myself to death. We picked up your dad last night. He's on the grill. Another reason you better deal, an' deal quick."

Jack's hands inched down.

"Jack," she cried. "Wait! Please!"

"Draw, you snake!" cried Jack, and his hand dipped.

HOOF echoes struck their ears. Two riders flashed into the dooryard. Blacky Blake took two long strides, placing himself between the combatants, gun leveled.

"Pick 'em young an' tender, eh Hack? Not this time. It's me an' you for it!"

Grant Bartee hurtled at Ramage, struck down his gun, caught his shoulders and spun him to a crashing fall. Ramage rolled, came to his knees, convulsed with coughing. He swabbed his lips, glaring at Grant.

"Gangin', huh? Jumpin' a man from behind? If I had my gun, I'd—"

"You'd what?" Grant picked up the man's weapon, tossed it. Hack caught it deftly, fanned it once. It was a precise action that lacked Grant's swift magic. Grant drove his lead first. Hack was dead as he fired by instinct. The space between the gun reports was indistinguishable, but only Ramage fell, a snarl frozen on his lips.

Echoes rocketed through the trees, died away. Four pairs of eyes clung to the still form of the gunslick, as if expecting him to rise again. Young Jack broke the hush, sobbing: "He was mine to kill. Mine. Why'd you horn into it, Mister?"

Anna May drew great shuddery breaths. Her hand dropped and she met Grant's glance. She was pale. Her eyes were full of terror. Her face was lined with suffering, and she was thinner than he remembered. It seemed to Grant that her wells of laughter had dried up—forever.

Her eyes were probing and he was grateful that he hadn't shaved, that the years had changed him past her recognition. Yet there was something working in those eyes that might be recognition. Or was it something she had read in his eyes?

His first glimpse of her had renewed the love he had long ago renounced. It ran through him like a fever, and he fought it fiercely. He knew she had not married; Blacky had made that clear. It brought a furtive gladness, a wild hunger to take her into his arms.

It was a wild dream, impossible. No matter what the facts were regarding the killing of Cowskin Dogger, he could never erase a felon's stain from his name; he could not ask a girl to share his shame. Nor had he the courage to tell the boy on crutches that the brother he had worshipped had sent down a fake rumor of his heroic death, to hide the dishonor of a jailbird's stripes.

Grant said, "Sorry I had to do that before a lady, ma'am."

She hesitated, as if reluctant to answer him. Then, with spirit: "I'm very grateful. Hack Ramage was a very bad man, wasn't he, Mister Blake?"

"One of the worst rotten eggs," murmured Blacky, "The Old Crow ever laid." He shot Grant a meaningful look, then asked Anna May: "Where's Old Jeb? Hid out, I bet yuh, about ready to let that bird have it when we lowered a horn on him! Come on out, Jeb!"

"Blacky!" There were tears in Anna May's eyes. "Dad isn't here. He went to Lincoln yesterday—started anyway, and didn't come home. Ramage said they

grabbed him and had him on the grill. He said they would kill him unless Jack let the Morphy crowd have the ABC for a thousand dollars. Is there anything I can do? I don't suppose Sheriff Brody—"

"Sheriff Brody's dead, girl." Blacky's eyes were far away, and he spoke absently. "Deputy Handman too. Billy the Kid killed 'em this morning. Pippin's on the trail with a posse."

"I hope Billy escapes!" Savagery swept her. "I hope Morphy's chickens come to roost! But dad—do you suppose?"

Blacky swung to saddle. "We'll go after Jeb, Anna May. You hold the fort here. Stay inside. Jack, go to bed and mind your nurse. Come on, pardner."

He spurred away, Grant at his flank. Grant looked back once. She stood with an arm about Jack's shoulder, staring after him. Then, as if she had waited only for his backward look, she went inside with Jack. The door shut.

CHAPTER FOUR

Lair of the Lobo

GRANT spurred alongside his flying companion. "What you think, Blacky?"

"Joker's wild, fella. Lincoln's a big county."

"There's one man who'll know."

"Sure. Why you think I turned up Bonito? We'll pay the gent a call."

"Look, Blacky, we don't know who'll win this scrap. If it's Morphy, he'll hunt down any one who even whispered against him. Bad enough to have Pippin mistrust you without crossing Ad Cutting. Suppose you cover me from the bluff across from Fritz's."

Grant expected a violent protest but Blacky only nodded. He tossed his hand and turned onto the mesa, leaving Grant to ride alone to the Cutting's headquarters. The rambling log house, tucked in a sheltered cove, showed no life except a sleepy dog that barked once, pounded the porch with its drowsy tail and resumed slumber. Colts lazed in the shade, down by the creek. Barn, bunkhouse and saddle shop looked deserted, but Grant knew he was being watched.

Dismounting at the side of the house and trailing the rein, Grant searched the bluff but saw nothing of Blacky. Moving to the porch, he stooped to pat the old dog and knocked.

The door opened. Ad Cutting stood there, heavier, softer. "Yes?" His inflection was intolerant. "What was it?"

Grant snorted. "Come off the high horse, Ad. Let's talk over old times."

Cutting started. "Old times? Should I know you?"

"Reckon you should, Ad. Remember Cowskin Dogger?"

Cutting went pale. "Bartee! God! I'd never have known you. What you doing in these parts?"

"Three guesses, Ad. How about inviting an old saddle mate in for a drink?"

Ad breathed hard, searching the bunkhouse. "I'm awfully busy—on the books, Bartee. Could you come—"

"No dice, Ad. We talk now. And don't call in help. You'll never live to enjoy it. Turn around! Get back inside!"

With Grant following close, Cutting turned into the hall, his back stiff, his hands shoulder high. In the well-furnished living room he sank limply into a chair.

"Listen, Grant. I know you think I killed Cowskin and planted that gun on you. I didn't. The man who did is here now, just back from dealing off wet cattle in the Panhandle. He's sleeping in yonder." He jerked his head. "Suppose you put a slug into him while he sleeps—"

"Yeah?" Grant grinned. "The idea interests me, Ad. Who is the sleepy gent?"

"Pat Garrett. He thinks I'm his friend, but I'm scairt of him. He's too damn good

with a gun. One of the fastest around."

Garrett! Grant recalled the tall, cadaverous segundo, as good a cowman as had ever forked a pony, a man without a drop of snake blood in his veins. He remembered the sorely ridden men saying: *"If only Pat rodded this drive."* Pat stomped his own snakes. He would never suggest shooting a man while he slept.

"No, Ad," said Grant. "I've another reason for being here. Where's Jeb Daughters?"

Ad started. "Jeb? Why, at ABC, I guess. Why?"

"You know why. Killing's too good for you." Grant drew his gun. "You want me to kill Pat because Morphy thinks he's in with the Kid. You'd collect a few hundred, like you did when you murdered my folks. God help you when I get all the truth on that. Where's Jeb?"

"I don't know," yelled Cutting. "How the hell?" The cocking pistol silenced him, laid the markings of a nameless dread on his cheeks.

"If you won't talk," said Grant, "I must assume you've killed Jeb. That would earn you a quick slug. Get smart, Ad. Where's that old man?"

"I tell you I don't know anything about him." Stubbornly.

"That your last word?" Grant flipped the gun level.

CUTTING caved. "You force me to guess," he wailed, "when my guess may be as worthless as yours. Maybe he's at Higuera's. Maybe not."

"Higuera's it is, Ad. Pray he's there and unharmed—for your own sake. Get out and saddle your pony. Don't stall for help to show—you wouldn't live to see it. Move!"

"Well, well, taking my host from his own house!" The voice came from a shadowed doorway. "What is this?" Pat Garrett stood there—towering, cadaverous Garrett who had held a mutinous crew together by his strength and fairness and understanding. Dull-eyed with sleep, he toyed with a revolver. "Who is this gent, Ad?"

"It's Grant Bartee, Pat! He threatens to kill me for framing Cowskin's murder onto him. He—"

"Whoa!" Garrett checked the hysterical outburst, looked at Grant. "Quit caterwaulin', Ad. God, Grant, they must have poured it onto you, in prison. You're paying Ad off, eh? Don't blame you, son. He killed Cowskin all right, bragged about it while he was drunk, in Denver."

"That's a lie. I was only joshin', Pat, and you know it."

"Don't give me the lie, you belly crawlin' stink lizard."

Grant grinned. "Says you killed Cowskin and he was scairt to tell the law."

"The scairt part is true, Grant. What's this about Jeb?" And when Grant explained, adding on what he suspected about the murder of his folks, Pat holstered, his pale eyes glittering. "We'll go to Higuera's," he snapped. "Lead out, Ad!"

Twenty-five miles to Paso Gallina—a slot breaking a shoulder of the Capitans. An eyrie on the Mescalero War Trail, it provided unobstructed views both ways, for four miles. And somebody was always watching.

Here the fabulous Juan Higuera—eccentric border *rico,* built a retreat where his soul might feed on stardust. Something happened. His place became a cantina where a fugitive was made welcome, furnished food, drink, women, ammunition—at a price.

The proprietor, Juan Bautista Angel Castinado y Higuera, was aloof from its sordid heartbeat. A man of charm and elegance, he played the guitar masterfully, sang his own compositions. And quoted his own poetry for the doubtful delight of thieves, killers and honkytonk girls.

"Higuera," said Blacky who had joined

them as they toiled up the grade, "is a poet, askin' little an' gettin' it. Real boss is Gam Romaine, who's stole, smuggled an' killed more'n any two *buscaderos* in New Mexico. Seemingly, the law can't touch him."

"Why should it?" scoffed Garrett. "Pay for protection is laying off Morphy."

"A slanderous lie!" yelled Cutting, looking back.

"You're free with that word, Cutting. It's true all the same."

"I aim to tell the Major how you feel, Garrett," promised Ad, darkly.

Devils danced on Garrett's cheeks. "Damn Morphy! I'm my own man, Cutting. You thought I'd follow you. Some say I wear Billy Bonney's collar. Others insist that Chisum an' McSween own me." His voice rose. His eyes flashed. "I bow to no man, you hear me? I'll kill anybody that crowds me. Friendly till my rights are tromped. That's me—Pat Garrett!"

Swift as the humor had hit him, it was gone. He slumped, riding without interest. A man friendless, alone. Slowly they climbed, the rock buildings in the pass apparently untenanted. Suddenly Ad Cutting shouted triumphantly. "Now, by hell, let's hear you blowhards talk! Here comes Rafter F—ten loyal hands drawing fighting pay!"

Garrett, Blacky, Grant—all twisted to look. Far back, spurring hard, came the warriors Morphy'd placed at Rafter F under Cutting.

Garrett spat. "Too far back, Ad. Come on, let's get these lazy crowbaits running."

Ad laughed. "Like hell, you squeak. I'll be apt to roll my—ugh!"

GARRETT'S quirt whistled. The lash striped Cutting's face and burned into his pony's flank. With Ad bent over in blind agony, Garrett galloped the man's mount upward, whipping it. They fairly flew. As they neared, Higuera appeared in the cantina doorway, dressed like a grandee, enjoying the race. When the ponies roared up, he yelled for his guitar. Men came crowding out, one carrying the instrument.

Higuera struck a chord. His limpid tenor lifted. Cutting, off his horse, leaped for the door, Garrett slashing at his legs. Higuera's eyes were up as he sang.

Cantar a tu de rienda suelta; corriendo por las baquetas,
Dar latigazos a los caballos—ai, muy dulce son las vidas,
Perseguidores espolen las ginetes; levantar muy alto polvereda,
Sentencia acercarse cabalgando—detras, oh sepultura!

To sing of full gallop, of running the gantlet,
To whip up the ponies—ah, how sweet to live,
Pursuers are spurring; they stir up tall dust yet,
Doom's gaining a-horseback—back, back, oh grave!

"Bravo!" Garrett was sneering. "One drives off the grave with lead, Higuera. We're forting up in your good stone house. Hope you don't object."

"Object, amigo? You are most welcome to Paso Gallinas. We lock the stout door against *bandidos* and enjoy the dreenk together, no?"

"No," raged Cutting. "These men are *bandidos*, Juan. They took me from my *casa*. My men chase them. If you help them, you cross Major Morphy, you savvy?"

Garrett silenced him with the quirt. Higuera said: "Enter, *compañeros*," and led the way. Grant, the last inside, admitted the swart, narrow-eyed men who had emerged to see the excitement.

Blacky growled: "Better have left them skunks outside, Grant. Gam Romaine, the big geezer yonder at the bar, outnumbers us four to one. It'll be better than seven to one when Rafter F arrives. Too much bite."

"We'll chew away at it," grinned Grant. "Let's check locks at the back."

They rummaged around the back rooms, securing the one rear entrance, disappointed that they had no hint that Old Jeb was here. In the barroom, Higuera had poured drinks and now he called them all up.

"Dreenk, my roosters! Leeft the glass. Long life to patriots! Death to tyrants!"

An inoffensive, general toast to a man of good conscience, it roused Romaine to violence. He swept his glass to the floor. "No, *por Dios,* I do not dreenk weeth peegs—to that. My friends come. When they enter, I dreenk."

"Don't try it, hombre," warned Grant. "You'll never reach the door."

Rafter F ponies were thundering into the dooryard. Men were dismounting, pounding on the door. Garrett drove a slug through the panel. A lead-burnt gunrider cried out. Rafter F answered, pouring slugs through the door.

Garrett pushed the struggling, caterwauling Ad Cutting toward the entrance, driving him frantic with fear.

"Don't shoot, boys! They got me fronting! For God's sake, Gam, do something!"

Romaine stepped free of the bar—a slab-built man, half French, half Indian. His broad face was aflame with conflicting passions. His hand, conceded to be lightning, rested on his gun butt. His voice was like distant thunder.

"Take off the 'ands, Garrett. You *cabrones* theenk—"

Pat shifted his glance, eyes chill, deadly, impersonal. His answer was framed by a spirit untamed, untamable. His long-barreled Peacemaker, secured from Bill Hickok's grieving sister three years before, described a short, blinding arc, gushing its deadly load. Struck center, Romaine shrieked out, falling as if his legs were severed.

Now all restraint evaporated. Hell erupted. Higuera banged his guitar, shouting a new ballad. A bull-voiced renegade yelled: "Give 'em hell, *mis bravos!* Down 'em all—for Gam!"

Grant and Blacky were drawing. Garrett triggered. Cutting, belly-down, squealed for mercy and begged for a gun. Forgotten was Jeb Daughters, whose absence had drawn those three warriors into this death trap.

CHAPTER FIVE

Battle of Paso Gallina

THE battle of Paso Gallina, fought in and around Juan Higuera's notorious cantina, still reads like a fairy tale, long years after the facts have been fully weighed and recorded. Eliminating Higuera for the moment, and Ad Cutting who never did get his face off the floor, it was three against eleven. Hopeless odds at close quarters, with every man firing one or two guns.

The archives of the West are filled with records that prove the fallacy of purely numerical odds. The shades of spirit, guts and stubbornness haunt one who holds that two men are better than one.

The renegades were bunched up and Death leaped upon them, as a lion falls on a deer. Caught without the facility of movement, they fought tigerishly and with a great burning of powder. But their targets were shifting, weaving, pouring lead into their midst. Soon their death cries drowned out their fighting yells.

Under the deadly fire of Pat Garrett, Blacky Blake and Grant Bartee, the front rank crumbled, pitching headlong to the floor. One threw his hands aloft in his death spasm and lunged down in a grotesque somersault. Another, mortally hit, went to his knees and fought to the last dying spark, his bullets splintering the floor. He bent slowly until his forehead rested on the floor, his face gray and

pain-riven, his eyes suddenly glazing.

One tried to clamber across the bar, and died there, arms hanging on one side, legs on the other. One, in a mad dash for the door, was struck in the side and chinned the floor, his pistol whirling in a crazy parabola.

Outside, the Rafter F cohort was battering at the stout door. Finding it impregnable, they scattered to the narrow slots that served for windows. From several of these they peered into the shadowy, smoke-filled room, firing at obscure figures they could not identify.

Clipped by one of these bullets from outside, Grant spun down, his senses spinning dizzily, his left side a torment of pain. He was conscious of a dim shape darting toward him out of the murk. He tried to get up his gun but couldn't. He was instantly glad, for Juan Higuera knelt beside him, pressing a flask to his lips.

The strong whiskey was like a new lease on life. "Ha, *companero,* thees theeng ees bad pain but she ees not serious. Just a scratch. 'Ere, take my peestola while I load yours. *Valgame,* but thees ees what I dream about so often when that cabrone take possession of me and my place. I am a *trobador*—a minstrel and poet, not a saloon keeper! *Ai, que malo!*"

He reeled down to one elbow as lead struck him, and then he was shooting, snarling. Blacky was behind an upended table, stuffing shells into his hot weapon. Pat Garrett, dragging his left leg as he shifted, cursed the battered renegades as he reloaded. Grant, still fuzzy in his thinking and fumbling with his fingers, jacked out empties and replaced them.

Only Higuera upheld the threat of their side, and not too capably. With this poetic genius, a gun was only a show, something to add to his romantic appeal.

Of the renegades, only half were still dangerous, but they were the cream of the lot. Holding such cover as they had available, they sniped at their foes, conserving their shells for the final showdown. That came quicker than anybody expected, and in a more astonishing way.

IN THE lull while men reloaded their weapons, activity resumed among the Rafter F hands outside. Someone bawled: "Now, leg it! Faster, faster! Faster!" Heavy timber struck the door in its middle, split it and tore it from its hinges. The six men carrying it sprawled in on their faces and Garrett and Grant killed two before they could scramble to safety.

There was a brief pause, and then the Rafter F men strode boldly to the door, each with a woman held before him—screaming, crying, pleading women from the cribs out back.

Not one of the renegade Morphy cowboys would have considered these pitiable creatures, had the shoe been on the other foot. But so sure were they that their enemies would not shoot the women that they advanced with obscene taunts, saving their slugs till they were inside, till their targets were unmistakable.

Garrett, a dead shot, almost tore an arm off one of these gunnies, then bellowed: "The bar! Behind the bar!"

Gunfire shook the cantina again, bullets finding the flesh of those four as they scrambled for the doubtful cover of the wooden counter. But none was out of action, each deadly as they darted behind the frail barricade. The bartender lay there, unharmed, biding his time. He leveled and blazed away.

Gunflame seared Grant's face and the slug creased his temple. Four bullets found the renegade's heart as the gun partners let him have it.

Cutting was on his feet now, standing at the doorless aperture, calling upon his men for a wipeout. "Push the girls up there, men," he ordered. "Ring the bar with 'em. Pour lead into those dogs and you'll split a thousand dollars apiece on 'em. Get it over with."

"Unless we bullet them floozies," muttered Pat Garrett, "we're dead pigeons."

"It's them or us," growled Blacky. "I never killed a woman, but—what's that?"

From somewhere outside came faintly chorusing yells, punctuated by the rolling echoes of hoofbeats. Then Cutting's anguished cries came from the doorway. "Horsebackers coming hell for leather! Eight of 'em. Who you reckon—? Hey, that's Billy the Kid leadin' 'em! Billy and his outlaw band! Here's big money on the hoof, boys! Half of you cluster here and we'll salt that bounty down. What a stroke of luck!"

The Rafter F boys and the remnant of Gam Romaine's lawless mob answered with a high yell. Each man considered himself part of the half Cutting had requested—the lucky half that would split a fortune over the body of the Kid. Each left it to the other to beard the quartet behind the bar.

Suddenly released, the terrified girls ran screaming into an adjoining room. Garrett looked at Grant. "Now!" he clipped, and came up shooting. The others were right with him. There were five shells in Grant's gun and they were his last.

The others were not much better off. Their fire withered the renegades in the doorway. Two went down, never to rise. The rest howled and ducked outside, many of them bullet-scored.

Wild wolf yelps greeted them, along with a sleet of bullets thrown by Billy the Kid and his band. They were not used to missing, nor did they miss now. Two survived the fusillade. One broke the mounted cordon, racing for the safety of the brush. Billy the Kid shot him in the back, just as he leaped off the sharp slant.

The other—Ad Cutting—chose the lesser of two evils and ducked back inside and came face to face with Grant, who was first from behind the bar and leading the four who rushed the door.

CUTTING saw him as he popped inside, and a strong, hard light broke across his cheeks. He did not pause. He spoke six swift, fateful words and in them was all the jealousy, all the hate, all the animosity that one ambitious man can crowd into his feelings for a bigger, better, braver man.

"Take what I gave your father!" he rapped out, and his gun was gushing.

A mighty weight took Grant's already weakened leg out from under him, hurling him to the floor. But some greater weight, a grim responsibility he could not have shirked under any circumstances, balanced him as he fell, cushioned the shock and left him set and ready to finish the ugly business.

"Take what you gave my mother!" he cried, and drove a bullet through the man who had robbed him of seven years of his life. Ad fired again and missed. He looked at Grant as no man had ever looked. Death plucked the mask from his face, and then Ad was skating across the floor with Garrett and Blacky and Juan Higuera, pouring slugs into his unfeeling body. . . .

The fight was over. With spurs singing, Billy the Kid and his mates—Bowdre, O'Folliard, French, McNab and Waite—came trooping in. The Kid saw Grant and went to him. A glance told him Grant's wounds were not serious and a brash grin touched his beardless face.

"Quite a ruckus you staged here, Cousin Grant. It's good we got here when we did. No, don't thank me. Thank Old Man Daughters. They had him cooped here but he got away, ran all the way to the ABC. Got there just as me and the boys did. We came right up."

"And were you ever welcome," said Grant gratefully, but the Kid was not listening. He stood there, every muscle relaxed, looking across at Pat Garrett.

"H'are yuh, Pat?"

"Hullo, Billy." They had been saddle

partners, these two, sharing blankets, food, excitement. Men strangely alike yet as different as the poles. Yet now some gray ghost seemed to hover between them, tightening their jaws, whetting a steelly edge to their words. "Looks like I owe you six bits or so, Kid."

"Forget it, Pat. What you doing for excitement these days, Pat?"

"Buckin' the tiger, Kid. Watchin' for the elephant an' listenin' for the hoot of the owl. Pretty dull. That's why I lowered a horn into this. Hear you been cuttin' loose."

Billy flushed. "Nothing much, Pat. They ain't seen nothing yet. It's a long list, but I'm working on it. I thought maybe you'd look me up and gimme some moral support, Pat. Little disappointed I haven't heard from you. Door's not locked yet, if you think you'd like—"

Garrett held up his hand, silencing him. "No, Kid. I'll do most anything you ask, but not that. You know me—I'm not scairt of any man. But I'm scairt of wholesale murder an' you should be, if you'd unchain that conscience of yours."

"Got no conscience, Pat. Got a damned good memory though. Better get on the band wagon."

"Mebby I will, Kid. But not yours."

"So-o-o." Billy sighed. "That's the way of it, huh? Should make a good show, you and me. Luck, fella. You'll need it."

"We'll both need it, Kid."

Here was the cleavage of the lines, the moment that was finally to pit them, one against the other, in the ring of death. The Kid's eyes cooled and he shrugged. He grinned at Grant, turned and went out, his wild young followers at his heels.

In a moment, the roar of their hoofs was echoing as they rode toward White Oaks and a bloody destiny.

PAT GARRETT was chuckling as he gave Grant a hand and pulled him to his feet. But that chuckle didn't reflect what was inside him. Grant felt him trembling and somehow he knew that before his eyes a friendship had been turned to enmity—an enmity that could only be washed out in blood.

Grant limped toward the door. Before him, Jeb Daughters stuck his whiskery face inside and bawled: "Here he is now!"

The oldster grinned slyly. "You may fool some woman, son, but don't never bet no important money on yore chances." He stood aside and there was Anna May standing in the doorway looking at him.

Just once did she drop her eyes before his glance. Then her head came up and she seemed to throw off the dark weight pressing against her. She moved to him, very slowly, her eyes searching his face. Then she was in his arms.

"Grant," she whispered. "Grant, dear."

He tore his hungry eyes from her and found Blacky looking at them with strain tugging at the muscles of his face. Grant laughed. "I thought," he drawled, "I'd dreamed up every kind of a homecoming there was, those seven years I rotted in a Wyoming pen, Blacky. But none of 'em was like this."

It was the explanation he had to make and, having made it, he fell silent and looked at her, his face a mask, his heart frozen as he waited for the answer he dreaded. Anna May's cheeks were tight and drawn as she struggled with her feelings. She held his eyes, letting him see what was in her heart. He took her hands and looked in her eyes.

"Anna May, what comes next? I thought I'd rather die than to tell you about—about—up there. But now—"

"Jackie?" she asked, gently.

"Yes, Anna May. How can I tell the kid I'm a common jailbird?"

She laid her fingers across his lips. "Hush, don't say that. We've known all along, ever since we came to the Ruidoso, Grant. Ad Cutting told us, trying to

poison my mind against you. But, thank heavens, I had Blacky to turn to. He would not have talked, except that we already knew. You will not have to tell Jackie anything. And Grant—"

"Yes, Anna May."

"You don't know what your coming home has meant to Jack. He has not walked since—since that awful night. When you rode up with Blacky, he knew you. He didn't dare trust his judgment. When you left, he was terribly excited. Without realizing what he did, with no more fuss than if he drank a glass of water, he got up and started pacing—without his crutches.

There was much more she wanted to say, but he gave her no chance. His arms went around her and their lips met in a kiss that held everything each one of them had ever felt for the other. In that kiss was a question asked and a question answered.

"The name's a bit tarnished, Anna May," he murmured, "but I'll work hard to rub out the stains. Maybe in a year or two—"

"That long, Grant? You'll be surprised what two people can do to stains, if they take a shine to one another."

They walked from the cantina, arms about each other, to meet the youth who had ridden up outside. Blacky, his eyes shining with happiness, looked at the awed Juan Bautista Angel Castinado y Higuera.

"Shut up!" he barked.

"Valgame!" cried the startled Latin. "I am saying nothing, señor. What can I say? Eet ees so beautiful I am w'at you call inspire'. Pat, 'ave you see w'at 'appen to my *guitarra?* I weel seeng you the song of a brave *caballero* and a beautiful señorita. A song the *gente* weel seeng w'en our bones are dust, señores. But first, let us 'ave the dreenk together. The dreenk of conquerors—*gracias á Dios!*"

THE END

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(Continued from page 101)

and was staring at it curiously as he rose. He came towards Harty, but he didn't see him. His face was creased with frank astonishment.

"Can you tie that?" he was saying, over and over. "Can you tie that? Can you tie that?"

Harty focused his eyes on the merchant with an effort. His brain, stupid with the after-effects of the shock he had suffered, caught the meaning of the words and he stared.

"Tie what?"

Egleston shook his head. "I just can't understand why he would do such a thing, that's all. Queerest thing I ever heard of. But then, just exactly what would a man like Belden do, when you come right down to it?"

Harty's jaw dropped. "You mean—you mean the gun wasn't—"

The merchant waved his hand. "Of course it's loaded, Harty. Belden wasn't as big a fool as that." He eyed the gun in his hand, and something made him speak softly, respectfully, as he explained.

"I guess Belden was a gambler to the end. He knew you didn't have a chance against him, and he knew what the stakes were if he shot you cold. Looks like he found it a little hard to take, so he found a gambler's way out."

"What do you mean?"

Egleston held up the heavy Colt. "He gave you a chance, son. A gambling chance. Looks like the decision was too hard for Belden to make, so he left it up to fate to decide who would walk out of this alive. He was a square gambler to the very end. Gave you three-to-one odds. Look for yourself."

Tom Harty took the gun in his hands and looked at it, a growing horror filling him.

Only two of the six chambers in the cylinder were loaded.

(Continued from page 7)

laughed. "Oh, you mean human rats."

"No," answered Ab Walters. "I mean real rats. They're a plague here, now. They came in on all them ships you see stranded out in th' bay. All th' crews hit for th' gold fields. An' th' rats hit for San Francisco. They've multiplied so fast that they ruin a lot of stuff. Only a few days ago, rats ruined a whole cargo of flour, down on th' Montgomery Street wharf. An' they ate three sacks of flour in my back room a night or two ago. They eat anything an' everything."

"Why don't you get a few cats?" asked Ince.

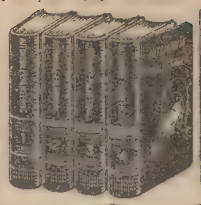
"There ain't none to be had," Ab answered. "Wish there was. Why, me an' all th' other businessmen in town would pay a hundred dollars for a cat. An' warehouses and wharfs would pay plenty for cats, too. But they just ain't none in San Francisco."

Because of the rats in his storeroom, Ab Walters gave up the battle and closed his store. Carter Ince, who had managed to save a hundred dollars in the month he worked, bade goodbye to San Francisco and its many rats—human and inhuman—and went to Los Angeles to look around.

With seventy dollars left in his pockets, Ince figured that he would find some illegitimate manner of making a fortune in this sleepy little adobe village. But Ince soon learned that Los Angeles only looked sleepy. The place was lousy with cutthroats and con men, too.

Sorrowfully, Ince came to the conclusion that he would have to make his living by honest toil. On leaving the Bella Union hotel one morning to search for a job, a black cat crossed his path. Being of a superstitious nature, he walked backwards until he came to the spot where he had first noticed the cat.

"Brother," laughed an onlooker, "if



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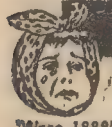
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you're goin' to back up every time you see a black cat in this town, you'll be walking backwards more than frontwards. This place is overrun with cats—black, white and intermediate."

"Where'd they all come from?"

"Originally, from th' ranchos around here. The Spaniards all love cats, and figure it's bad luck to kill any. So th' cats have been multiplyin' like rabbits for years an' years. They're a nuisance. But th' natives won't kill 'em, an' we Americans are too lazy to do it. Hell, they must be thousands of cats on th' loose in Los Angeles."

Lady Luck had finally whacked Carter Ince over the head. Rats in San Francisco —and too many cats in Los Angeles. The conclusion was so simple that Ince nearly overlooked it. But this opportunity was too obvious for even Ince to muff.

FIRST, he went to the city authorities and told them he would rid the city of its excess number of cats—if they would furnish large crates, and pay ten cents for each cat he relieved them of. "I will," he told them, "then take the cats, in crates, down to San Pedro and put them on a boat headed north. Out in th' ocean I will throw them overboard. Oh, yes, you pay th' freight charges on th' steamer, too."

The city fathers readily agreed, and likened Ince to the Pied Piper of old. He was treated as a hero, and given all of the cooperation he needed.

Ince put a few carpenters to work constructing crates, and soon had every loafer and kid in the city bringing in stray cats. For each cat he paid the collector one dime and got five hundred of them.

The *Sea Bird* docked at a San Francisco wharf and, immediately, news of the cat cargo spread throughout the town. Business came to a standstill, and a goodly part of the entire population descended on

Ince and his valuable shipment of livestock.

The cat sale was fast and hectic. Ab Walters had not exaggerated when he said he and the other town merchants, shippers and warehousemen would pay one hundred dollars per cat. They did, and willingly. At the end of the sale, with every feline traded for cash, Carter Ince found himself rich.

The only drawback was that the money he acquired had the taint of honesty on it, and this rankled in Ince's larcenous soul. However, after due thought on the subject, Ince built and furnished a large and gaudy gambling palace, which he dubbed, naturally, "The Black Cat."

With the scientific aids of trick dice, gaffed roulette wheels, and deftly crooked dealers and "house" players, Ince soon converted his honest fortune into a much bigger and dishonest one. This made him very happy and he was enjoying himself immensely.

One night, about two weeks of operating the busy Black Cat, Ince stood at the long, luxurious bar of his establishment, and let his avid eyes rove over the crowd of citizens fighting for space at the various gambling layouts. Ince smiled at the new bartender and, in a playful and bantering manner, said, "Look at those people. Fighting for a chance to lose their money. This is great, eh?"

The bartender nodded and allowed as how it was great.

"Yessir!" Ince laughed, "To tell you th' truth—I ain't enjoyed myself so much since the time they lynched your brother for horse stealing."

This remark—one of Ince's favorite and meaningless jokes—was a common one around the diggings at the time. But the new barman, recently arrived from Texas, had not heard it before. Quickly reaching under the counter, he brought up a derringer and fired it straight into

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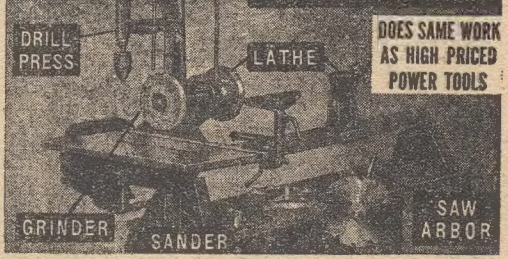

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his boss' right eye. Ince died on the spot. How was he to know that the strange bartender actually had a brother, an erstwhile horse thief, who had died at the hands of a mob down in Texas?

Whether or not the cats which Ince had imported would have rid San Francisco of the rat scourge still remains a question because, shortly after Ince's death, the city had one of its periodic fires, and the entire place was burned to ashes—cats and rats included.

After San Francisco was rebuilt the rats came back. But the cats did not.

Well, cats or no cats, rats or no rats, the frontier was jam-packed with colorful characters like Ince—men who knew what they wanted but never got it, or men who never knew what they wanted, and got it anyway. Outlaws who hid stolen gold in the hills, only to discover a huge strike where they buried the coins. Men who spent years searching for the lost Panamint Mine. Men who grew rich overnight and died penniless.

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Next issue of *Ace High Western Stories*—the November issue—will be on sale September 28. There will be stories by Tom Roan, James Shaffer, Frank P. Castle and many others—130 pages packed with exciting, lusty tales, and tough man-sized characters—the men who built the West and made this country the greatest in the world.

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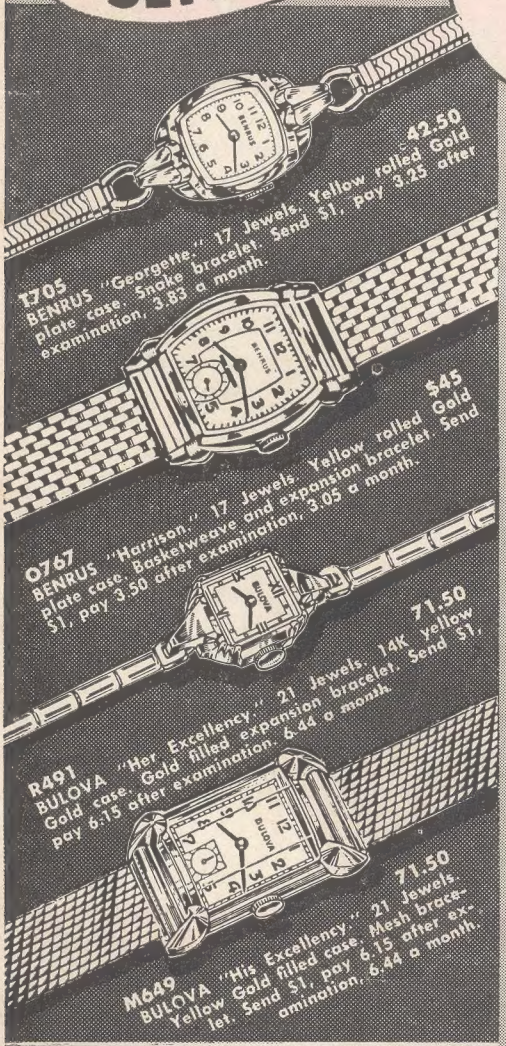

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